

To: Council
Date: 29 September 2016
Title of Report: Questions on Notice from members of Council and responses from the Board Members and Leader, republished after the meeting to include 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. Responses are included.
3. Questioners can ask one supplementary question of the councillor answering the original question.
4. This report is republished as part of the minutes pack after the Council meeting and includes supplementary questions and responses asked and given at the meeting.
5. Unfamiliar terms not explained in the text are briefly explained in footnotes.

Questions and responses

Board member for a Clean and Green Oxford

1. From Councillor Wolf to Councillor Tanner – electric car charging

What progress is being made on the introduction of electric car charging infrastructure in Oxford?

Response

The Go Ultra Low Oxford project has been funded by the Office for Low Emission Vehicles and aims to provide a solution to the issue of electric vehicle charging for residents who are unable to install a home charger due to a lack of private off-street parking. We will trial a range of solutions which provide residents with a means to charge their car at or near to their home.

During the trial up to 6 different solutions will be trialled at total of 30 locations over 12 months. The project has had a very strong response from the public with 20

participants signed up to the trial of which 12 already own an ultra-low emissions vehicle (a 100% electric car, a plug-in hybrid or extended-range electric vehicle).

To help us ensure we collect data from all 30 installed charging points, car clubs will also act as 'trial users' to provide extra quantitative data for our study. We have been in discussion with local car clubs – two of which have expressed a strong interest in being involved. We are developing our selection criteria in order to select a partner.

We have received interest in the procurement stage from a range of companies – from multinationals to British and European SMEs. We are completing the design of our procurement process and are in the final stage of market feedback on our chosen approach.

Supplementary question

Does the scheme provide any incentives for people to buy electric cars and are there any points available in the public realm for general use?

Response

A number of residents have expressed interest in purchasing an electric car. There are a few charging points available in public spaces and we are considering introducing more.

2. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Tanner – Low Carbon Hub

Will the portfolio holder join me in congratulating the Low Carbon Hub for successfully raising the funds from their solar PV share offer? The systems funded by this offer will benefit 18 schools and businesses across the county of Oxfordshire generating renewable energy equivalent to that necessary to power 1,321 homes and save 46,880 tonnes of CO₂.

Response

The Low Carbon Hub and the communities that they support are national leaders in community energy and Oxford City Council is pleased to have worked in partnership with them through the EU-funded OxFutures programme over the last four years.

In addition to the Low Carbon Hub's recent successful share offer raise, our partnership with the Hub and the County Council has given rise to investments in projects in the city and county totalling over £9m and resulting in around 2800 tonnes of carbon emissions avoided every year.

3. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Tanner –Road side emissions

Will the portfolio holder be supportive of a study of road side emissions (as Lancaster Council has done) in Oxford City Centre which looks specially for the presence of the toxic particles implicated by this new evidence in the formation of Alzheimer's? (study reference: <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2016/08/31/1605941113>)

Response

We have been monitoring levels of fine particles in Oxford through monitoring of particulate matter for several years in the City Centre. Automatic monitoring station data for Particulate Matter (PM₁₀) shows that the measured annual means were 21µg/m³ on the High Street and 13µg/m³ at St Ebbe's. These are well within the

objective of 40µg/m³. Automatic monitoring station data for Particulate Matter (PM_{2.5}) shows that the measured annual mean was 10µg/m³. This compares to an annual mean of 14µg/m³ measured in 2010.

The strong scientific evidence is clear about the impact of air pollution on health and reinforces the need for collective action to address the issue and improve air quality. However, it is worth noting that the NHS has urged caution in the interpretation of the study referred to, as it feels it does not finally prove a link between Alzheimer's and air pollution (<http://www.nhs.uk/news/2016/09September/Pages/Pollution-particles-in-the-brain-linked-to-Alzheimers-disease.aspx>).

4. From Councillor Goddard to Councillor Tanner – Swift City

Can the councillor give details of the City Council's involvement in Oxford's role as England's first 'Swift city'?

Response

The Oxford Swift City project has been led by the RSPB with support from Oxford City Council, Oxford University, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC), Environment Resources Management and the local Wildlife Trust to develop the successful grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund which has seen an award made of £83,700 to the project.

The City Council has hosted all meetings of the partnership and will continue to play a key role in the delivery of the project which will see a 'Swift Tower' erected and swift boxes installed across the city to support this threatened bird, to ensure they continue to make Oxford their home.

Supplementary question

Could the project be furthered via development control requiring swift friendly building and installation of swift boxes?

Response

This can be put forward as a policy in the new Local Plan.

5. From Councillor Brandt to Councillor Tanner – Air Quality

Will the portfolio holder be revisiting Oxford's air quality strategy in the light of shocking new evidence of the link between traffic pollution and Alzheimer's?

Response

As previously mentioned, the evidence which links Alzheimer's and air pollution is inconclusive at this stage. It is however clear that air pollution has a very serious impact on health and leads to many early deaths each year, which is why the City Council takes air pollution very seriously. The City Council's Air Quality Action Plan is up to date and delivery of action is progressing well.

6. From Councillor Fooks to Councillor Tanner – Air Quality 2

I am sure I do not need to remind you that air pollution is held responsible for more than 50 premature deaths in Oxford each and every year, as well as the exacerbation

of respiratory problems for many more. Some time ago I asked about the steps the City Council were taking to reduce air pollution in the city and in particular that caused by diesel freight vehicles. I was told that there were plans to reduce the parking of delivery vans outside the Town hall, even the number of such deliveries. Can you please tell Council when we shall see a reduction in the congestion and pollution caused by vehicles stationary outside the Town Hall, where the traffic is regularly held up for some time by this parking? As this ought to be within our control, why is it still happening?

Response

You are quite right that traffic outside the Town Hall is a complete disgrace. The City Council has significantly reduced deliveries to both the Town Hall and St Aldates Chambers. But the numbers of buses at certain times and delivery vehicles parked to deliver to the High Street create unacceptable problems.

Cllr Alex Hollingsworth and I will continue to work with the County Council to improve the situation outside the Town Hall for pedestrians and bus passengers. Although levels of pollution have fallen in St Aldates, they have not fallen sufficiently.

Supplementary question

Should this Council set a good example in this and reduce the congestion our operations create?

Response

We do restrict staff parking, and restrict deliveries to the Town Hall and St Aldates as far as possible. To make a real difference we need co-operation with the highways authority.

Board member for Community Safety

7. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Sinclair– Waterways PSPO

Given that last month the Manifesto Club branded PSPOs a "busybodies' charter" and singled out Oxford's proposed Waterway's PSPO as one the worst in the country, will Councillor Sinclair give assurances to Oxford's boating community that she remains open minded as to whether or not a PSPO should be applied to Oxford's waterways?

Response

The Council are currently consulting with stakeholders on a draft Order. Over 30 responses have been received containing views and ideas on the problems faced by a wide range of waterways users. Detailed conversations have taken place with some interested parties to further explore the concerns raised.

Supplementary question

I welcome the greater public engagement but as the situation changes so often will you keep the conversations going and keep talking to the boating community?

Response

Yes, we are continuing the dialogue with the boating community and waterways users.

8. From Councillor Wade to Councillor Sinclair– Waterways PSPO 2

Would the Board Member provide a progress report on the PSPO consultation and confirm whether a final deadline for comments has been agreed.

Response

The deadline was announced at the last Council. Phase one of the consultation will now finish at the end of March 2017, as detailed on the Council's website.

9. From Councillor Gant to Councillor Sinclair– City Centre PSPO

When the city centre PSPO was introduced in February 2016, the view was expressed that its geographical reach was too wide, and that it included land and properties owned and managed by the University and colleges which should have been excluded. A question at last full council asked specifically how many times the order had been used within certain defined areas. Detailed answers were not forthcoming. However, Councillor Sinclair did refer to an "arrangement agreed with the university and colleges". Could Cllr Sinclair provide details of this arrangement, and written confirmation that the University has changed the view expressed when the order was introduced, that it should not cover its own property? Could the board member also confirm if records are kept of where advice sheets and fixed penalties are issued, and if so how many have been issued north of St Giles Church?

Response

There are working arrangements in place with the University Security Services. Council officers regularly attend joint information sharing meetings and will attend University land if requested to do so by the University. The advice sheets are collated and the majority are given out as you would expect in Cornmarket Street, Queen Street or logged as the city centre. It is therefore not possible to highlight the streets north of St Giles.

Board member for Culture and Communities

10. From Councillor Wade to Councillor Simm– Events policy

Would the Board Member agree that a policy needs to be consulted on urgently for the number, size and type of events taking place within the city? Currently each event appears to be agreed or refused on an ad hoc basis by the Events Team, with the input of County Highways. There appears to be no overall strategy.

Would the Board Member join me in agreeing that the policy should include consideration of the sponsors of these events, when their values are not those which our city seeks to promote?

Response

Events in the city are approved in accordance with the broad guidelines set out in the Culture Strategy 2015-18. Peter McQuitty (Corporate Lead: Culture and Events) is currently reviewing city events management with the aims of streamlining processes and making approval criteria clearer. The review will also state ethical criteria that we expect events organisers to abide by.

11. From Councillor Wade to Councillor Simm– Half Marathon

The Half Marathon is set to happen again this year on 9 October, despite the concerns that Councillors have been expressing since August of last year. Yet again Old Marston will be shut off for several hours, as will Thackley End and Cunliffe Close. This year Councillors were advised by the City Events Team and the race organisers that all households, colleges and businesses along the route would be leafleted twice with details of road closures. It was accepted that 8,500 leaflets would need to be sent out in each batch. The first batch has now gone out but, to my certain knowledge, Kingston, Hayfield, Polstead, Fyfield, Norham and Rawlinson Roads, Benson Place, Lady Margaret Hall and the Aristotle Lane Estate have not received leaflets. I suspect other roads may also have been omitted.

Can Councillor Simm confirm that every effort will be made to ensure that the second tranche of leaflets go out to all the roads affected i.e. east and west of Banbury, Woodstock, Kingston Roads, Walton Street and the City centre.

Response

The event organisers have committed to distributing the leaflets and the City Events Team is liaising with them to make sure that they do as they said they would do. The City Council is not the organiser of this event. The City Events Team is attempting to negotiate an appropriate balance between an event enjoyed by thousands that promotes healthy lifestyles and the interests of residents and businesses. We can make representations but the route approval rests with the highways authority.

Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services

12. From Councillor Goff to Councillor Brown– City Centre Switchboard

On Thursday 8th September the city council switchboard was closed for an hour for staff training causing considerable inconvenience to residents of my ward and others. I understand it was similarly closed about a week earlier. Does the Board Member think this is acceptable and is it a regular occurrence?

Response

It's a shame that Cllr Jean Fooks didn't share with Cllr Goff the answer I gave to her for the same question at Council on 7 December 2015. Cllr Goff was not a member of this council then so I will reproduce the answer below.

The question and response – Q1 on the 7 December 2015 – were (*from the supplement to the minutes*)

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.

We have checked our records from Thursday 8th September and the week prior and can confirm that the contact centre lines reopened promptly at 11 o'clock on both weeks as is normal. To date we have not received any negative feedback from customers apart from that from Cllrs Fooks and Goff.

Supplementary question

This was raised with me by a distressed constituent who said the closure was in fact for an hour.

Response

The response from December still stands and this is still considered the most effective way to deliver training and works well for staff and the public. There have been no other complaints to my knowledge.

13. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Brown– ICT initiatives

A recent research study by Brunel University has found that public sector digital transformation initiatives have been mostly 'cosmetic' and have not delivered in terms of outcomes or return on investment. Could the Lead Member please give her comments on these findings with reference to the ICT initiatives introduced by Oxford City Council over the past two years?

Response

Oxford City Council is proud of putting customers at the heart of everything it does. In 2016 we achieved full corporate accreditation in Customer Service Excellence, with all services being able to demonstrate how we listen and respond to our customers' needs. Our satisfaction levels with telephone and face-to-face are very high based on Govmetric results with our telephony satisfaction rate consistently achieving more than 99% month on month (Govmetric score 'great' at 93%+) and face-to-face achieving

between 85% and 95% (Govmetric score 'great' at 65%+) putting us into the top 10 nationally in 2016.

We have also made great strides in recent years in improving online services for our customers;

- We launched a new website for the Council, completely re-writing all its content, improving search results for customers and applying a new design to encourage mobile device use and improve accessibility. This receives over 120,000 visits per month and facilitates 102,000 online transactions across 184 separate online services
- We introduced a new design for many of our forms based on user feedback and advice from national experts to improve the customer experience and have worked to improve accessibility for our online services through improved design, easier to read content and tools that assist people e.g. Browsealoud that provides translation of text into other languages, provides a readaloud facility and offers alternative font/format options for those that are visually impaired or dyslexic.
- We have launched new websites for Oxford Town Hall, Direct Services and the District Data service using the approach as our main website, and are working on three new sites to launch this year (Oxford Strategic Partnership, Oxford West End, Low Carbon Oxford)
- We are working with Smart Oxford to launch an Open Data portal to improve our transparency and give customers better access to data and information they need.
- More people are contacting us using online channels; our year to date performance in August 2016 was 30.6% of all contact we received representing a 5% increase over the same time last year.
- More visitors now using mobile devices than desktop visitors to view our website (42% in December 2015 increasing to 52% in August 2016)
- There has been a 4% increase in the number of customers completing our online forms rather than abandoning them midway through
- Innovations such as the automated Garden Waste management system, the online Pest Control appointment booking system, Netcall Missed Bin reporting, eClaim and eBilling have all contributed to our award by Kana (Lagan) of the Best Customer Web Experience 2015 and has resulted in significant increase in customer self-serve (e.g. garden waste online transactions now at 50%+ of all garden waste transactions, and use of eClaim has increased from 13% in the first quarter of implementation to 60% after 18months)
- The more recently introduced Tenants Portal for booking repairs online has resulted in a higher success rate for repairs closed at first visit and further phases of development are now nearing completion that should significantly reduce calls into the contact centre.

However, we recognise that there is more we can do, which is why CEB on 17 November will be considering a Digital Strategy for the Council to adopt. This will seek to build on our successes and implement the best practice approach spearheaded by the Government Digital Service (GDS), as being adopted by leading councils across the country.

Supplementary question

Have these initiatives given a good return on the investment and are they value for money?

Response

I would consider they have as self-service, online and phone options save everyone time and money. We will be bringing further proposals to the Executive Board to increase digital services but will keep a balance so that people are not disadvantaged by their preferred method of accessing services.

14. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Brown – Housing Benefit

In how many instances is Oxford City Council paying housing benefit on properties owned by educational institutions, in particular Oxford University and its associated colleges, and Brookes, and what is the annual total of these benefits.

Response

I'm not entirely clear what it is that Councillor Thomas is asking.

If his question refers to students' entitlement to housing benefit, then the majority of students are not eligible to claim housing benefit. The Government expects students to use other money, like student loan (or other source of student finance for postgraduates) to pay their rent.

Full time students

Example of full time students who can claim housing benefit are:

- lone parents
- students whose partner is also a student and one or both of them are responsible for a child
- those in receipt of income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, or income-related employment and support allowance
- students who live in supported accommodation and receive universal credit
- students who have a disability and qualify for a disability premium or severe disability premium
- those who get a disabled student's allowance because of a hearing disability

Part-time students claiming housing benefit

Part-time students can usually claim housing benefit if they rent privately. But if they are studying part-time and stay in university-owned housing or halls of residence, they can only claim housing benefit if they fall into certain categories.

Examples of part time students who can claim housing benefit are those who:

- are disabled
- have dependent children
- receive income-related benefits.

Last year we made no such housing benefit payments to students.

Should the question be the payment of housing benefit paid specifically in relation to properties owned by educational institutions then regrettably this is not information that can be easily obtained since in many cases the payment of housing benefit is made to an individual not the landlord and in any case the landlord may not necessarily be the owner.

Supplementary question

Are the universities renting their property in the private sector and if they are, are they receiving subsidies in the form of housing benefit paid to their tenants?

Response

It's an interesting question and may be worth investigating, but as it is difficult to establish the ownership of properties we don't have the data.

15. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Brown– Inaccessible Planning website

Members have been contacted on a number of occasions by residents who claim that the Oxford City Council planning website has been inaccessible. Can the Board Member please state on which dates during the past 12 months to August that the planning website has been affected by downtime or technical faults which have taken it out of action for any period of time?

Response

It became apparent following the ICT outage in Sept 2015 that County were not able to provide any stats on application or server availability so we implemented our own solution from December 2015 hence we do not have any data from August to December 2015.

A summary of all the dates from December 2015 onwards when the Planning portal was inactive together with the duration of the outage in minutes is shown below. The full detail by date is included in the attached spreadsheet.

Date	Number of outages	Duration (minutes)	Availability (%)
2015			
Dec	11	1679	96.24%
2016			
Jan	300	717	98.39%
Feb	174	1828	95.62%
Mar	27	4392	90.16%
Apr	1	4	99.99%
May	8	19	99.96%
Jun	0	0	100.00%
Aug	3	1505	96.63%
Sep	1	1	100.00%

Grand Total	525	10145	97.37%
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The outages in December 2015 and August 2016 were due to major incidents from our infrastructure provider (County in December and SCC in August). They were not related to any specific issue with the IDOX Public Access solution (the planning portal). The outages in February and March 2016 were related to transition and the migration of the network connectivity.

Following the lessons learnt from the outage in September 2015, we responded swiftly to subsequent outages with messages advising customers of the issues with the planning portal and extended consultation deadlines where appropriate. Regular communications were maintained with affected customers and senior stakeholders.

We have resolved the underlying connectivity issues that caused the problems in Feb/March and implemented more sophisticated monitoring of the relevant websites so we are able to act more promptly if issues do occur.

We have worked with the application provider (IDOX) to review and update the application so that we are using the most recent supported version and it is implemented according to their best practice.

Supplementary question

Are consultation deadlines extended when the online system is down?

Response

Yes they are.

Board member for Housing

16. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Rowley– Council owned Boats

Is Councillor Rowley aware that in Leiden - one of Oxford's twin cities - council-owned boats make up part of the social rented sector and does he think Oxford should follow suit?

Response

Yes, I am aware that Leiden Council owns a small number of houseboats. Leiden has more canals than any City in Europe except Amsterdam, and has a thriving private houseboat rental market, so makes sense for the Council to intervene. In Oxford such a project would be of very marginal benefit, and given that some houseboat owners struggle to find legal moorings, it would be impractical. I do not therefore propose to invest public resources in this.

Supplementary question

Is this option worth pursuing as a solution?

Response

While it's an innovative option, it isn't worth the council pursuing given the impracticality.

17. From Councillor Simmons to Councillor Smith– London 2017

Given the excellent engagement that the Council had with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, has the portfolio holder made approaches regarding the role that Oxford might play in London 2017?

(London 2017 refers to the IAAF and IPC 2017 World Championships, London's biggest sport event since the 2012 Olympics where 200 countries and 3,300 athletes will be competing in 245 events).

Response

Yes the Sports and Leisure teams are busy planning how we can best use the 2017 World Championships to inspire our residents. We have already secured the final of the prestigious National Schools Athletics Championships to be held at Horspath at the beginning of July. We will be also working with our local schools to maximise the opportunity and also Oxford City Athletics club. Last year we resurfaced our athletics track at Horspath and we are also continuing to work on the creation of a new Sports Park in Horspath.

Supplementary question

I am glad to hear we are looking at this. Could we look at hosting teams for the games?

Response

I will speak to the sports development team about this suggestion.

18. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Smith – signs in Florence Park

Would the board member support the installation of signs in Florence Park asking cyclists to cycle, slowly and safely?

Response

The safety of pedestrians in our parks is something we would want to take all appropriate steps to ensure, especially in the vicinity of our children's play areas. However, we try to avoid having lots of signs telling people what they can't do. We do not believe that such signs are always effective. I have asked our parks officers to increase their patrols in the park for a period of time so we can address this concern.

19. From Councillor Goddard to Councillor Smith– Pavilions

Would the board member join me in welcoming the recent opening of the lower pavilion at Cutteslowe Park, and congratulating the Summertown Stars football team on leveraging the vast majority of the cost, so that a substantially reduced figure fell on the council? And could the board member provide an update on progress of the proposed pavilion for Five Mile Drive?

Response

It was a great honour to officially open the lower Pavillion at Cutteslowe Park and I hope the Summertown stars go from strength to strength in their new base. I know the club worked hard in order to achieve the national recognition which enabled them to

work with our Sports Development team to bid for external funding from Sport England and the Football Foundation and on behalf of the council I offer my congratulations and thanks to all the volunteers involved. Discussions with the club on the provision of changing room facilities at Five Mile Drive are ongoing.

Supplementary question

Would you agree that it would do no harm to provide more facilities, make more use of the existing ones, and to keep the community involved?

Response

Yes. If we can provide first class facilities for the football club and also allow others to use these that would be good.

20. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Smith– Community Provisions

Given that the planning review meeting was advised that the main occupants of the new Quarry pavilion will be users of the football pitches, can the Board Member explain what other provision is being made for other local community users and how far she is satisfied that this is good value for money given that the total reported cost is £1.2 million

Response

The new pavilion not only provides a great facility for the club who have a large number of teams of all ages. It does also include a community room and kitchen. While it is to be expected that local football teams will make frequent use of the Pavillion, it will be available for hire to the whole community and I hope it becomes a much loved community asset.

Board member for Planning and Regulatory Services

21. From Councillor Wolff to Councillor Hollingsworth– City owned Park & Rides

Under what conditions might the portfolio holder re-consider the Council's decision not to allow the space above City owned Park & Rides to be used for affordable housing?

Response

As the Councillor is aware, any proposal for major development of this sort has to be in compliance with the Local Plan, and the policies contained within it. Each of the three city-owned Park and Ride sites also have important role to play in the city's current public transport provision, and there are significant policy constraints on them in the current Local Plan: none of them are allocated for housing; one rests within a flood plain area that is unsuitable for residential development; another sits on contaminated land; and so on. While the Council is duty bound to consider all serious, and otherwise, proposals for allocations of new sites for housing as part of the Local Plan review we are currently carrying out, I am personally doubtful that some of these sites will be suitable for allocation as housing sites.

Supplementary question

How many hectares of land in the city are dedicated to stationary vehicles?

Response

If you could define what you would include and exclude for me, I can find out – for instance does this include just formal car parks.

22. From Councillor Wade to Councillor Hollingsworth– Consultation during Holiday periods

Would the Board Member agree that the time for comments for planning applications by members of the public should be extended by two weeks when the application comes in at the start of Christmas, Easter and Summer holiday periods. The current deadline, which doesn't recognize holiday periods, exacerbates the problem that residents have in finding out about planning applications quickly or at all. A return to the practice of sending out hard copy letters to neighbouring properties would also be extremely welcome. Would the Board Member undertake to explore this?

Response

The period for notification/consultation on planning applications is set out in national planning regulations but is also related to the target periods the government has set for deciding planning applications. The failure of the local planning authority to reach a decision within the appropriate timescale can be a reason for appeal by an applicant on the grounds of non-determination so a balance has to be struck between the period for public notification and efficient processing of planning applications. Holiday periods such as Christmas and Easter are taken into account in the end to end period allowed for public notification on planning applications being considered at these times. Arbitrarily adding two additional working weeks to the overall period for neighbour notification when there are bank and public holidays cannot be justified particularly where we already adjust our notification period to take account of these days and when the planning on-line system is available to view the entire time. In addition, our on-line planning system allows for bespoke email alerts to be set up that anyone can subscribe to and this service is completely automated in advising of planning applications being received in a particular area. The 'summer holidays' covers an extended period if related to the school holidays but most business, including the council as a service provider have to operate on a 'business as usual' basis over this period. The vast majority of people do not take holidays covering the entire period of school summer holidays.

As the Councillor will be aware, the 'practice of sending out hard copy letters' is one that comes with considerable costs, and has been explored and rejected as a poor use of limited funds on many occasions. There is no evidence that there has been a reduction in comments on planning applications since the ending of this practice; indeed, the evidence is that there has been an increase in response rates. I remain of the view that in a time of drastically reducing budgets across the public sector there are better ways of investing scarce resources.

23. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Hollingsworth– Planning Policies

Given that the officer report on the hospitals' energy pipe application indicated that "the Core Strategy, Local Plan and Site and Housing Plan provide relatively limited planning policy that relates specifically to the installation of an energy link", what action is the Lead Member taking to address this issue?

Response

The Local Plan review has begun, and officers will consider whether or not there is a need for new policy on this – rather unusual – type of development. It is not apparent that the lack of a specific policy in the current local plan put the council at any disadvantage in dealing with the energy pipeline on its particular merits.

24. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Hollingsworth– Local Plan

Concerns have been expressed by residents that the wording of the paper questionnaire and the online questionnaire about issues and options for the Local Plan were different – please can the Board member explain the reasons for this?

Response

The two version were deliberately different, because the online questionnaire had greater capacity to include more background information and more detail than could be fitted comfortably on the paper questionnaire. The former was intended to be used by those with time to look at background documents if they so chose, and the latter was handed out at events for completion on the spot, and was thus of necessity somewhat shorter. The purpose of the consultation process at this stage was to generate ideas, and it was important to use best practice for the different media being used. The response to the consultation, which is still be assessed by officers, suggests that having a range of methods worked well and that no particular method caused problems for respondents.

Supplementary question

Can we highlight more clearly on the leaflet that a fuller consultation is available on the website as some respondents to the paper survey did not realise the online option was different?

Response

I think the website link was obvious on the paper survey and staff at the events did mention the online survey but we will see what can be done to emphasise the difference between the two consultations.

25. From Councillor Wilkinson to Councillor Hollingsworth–Consultant costs

In February I asked how much had been paid out by OCC over the past 12 months in acquiring reports done by individuals external to the planning department e.g. agency staff, ftc, casual etc. The figures at that time were as follows:

Planners/Planning consultants £214,138

Interim Head of Service (Planning & Regulatory) £80,250

Heritage/Listed Buildings £67,682

Biodiversity Advice £20,744

Total £382,814

Please can the Lead Member give members an update for the 12 months leading up to the end of August 2016?

Response

Planners/Planning consultants £395,007

Interim Head of Service (Planning & Regulatory) £49,781

Heritage/Listed Buildings £71,456

Biodiversity Advice £9,738

Total £544,407

Supplementary question

What can be done to reduce the spending on agency staff and can the service support the proposed 4 apprentice planners?

Response

The apprentices will be junior planning officers undertaking their professional training and will quickly be an asset to the service. There are challenges in recruiting the right staff but new people are now appointed or in post and agency costs should start to reduce.

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

26. From Councillor Simmons to Councillor Turner– Council Borrowings

Given the record low levels of fixed short and medium term interest rates, will the portfolio holder consider increasing the City's borrowing to help support the development of desperately needed affordable housing and low carbon infrastructure in the City?

Response

The Council has recently set up a wholly owned Housing Company which will purchase and build new affordable homes in the City. In March 2016 the Council approved the first loan to the Housing Company of £12.25 million in March 2016, to purchase the first phase of the Barton Development funded from prudential borrowing through the Council's capital programme. The Housing Company's Business Plan going forward will include purchasing the second phase of properties at Barton bringing its total portfolio to around 350 dwellings, together with other commercial activity all funded from borrowing. The Housing Company Business Plan if approved will seek to fund around £90 million of housing related activity through borrowing. At the same time the Council has authorised loans to the Low Carbon Hub in the order of £2.3 million to undertake activity which reduces carbon emissions such as the Sandford Hydro project. Elsewhere in the Council's Capital Programme the Council estimates that it will incur £34 million of prudential borrowing to fund investment property and other housing related regeneration.

The decision to externally borrow for funding these schemes is separate to that of the decision to spend. Such decisions are taken in the light of the availability of 'internal borrowing' making use of its reserves and balances pending their use. Whilst the PWLB rates are at an all-time low, 50 year PWLB will currently cost around 2.20%, this charge is nonetheless higher than investment interest rates currently earned by the Council in banks and building societies of around 0.70%. To this extent there is a 'cost of carry' to the authority in taking out external borrowing now, since the rate earned is

less than the rate paid. With base rates however predicted to fall still further to say 0.1% it may be that borrowing rates will also fall and the Council will continue to monitor the situation and if it is considered financially beneficial to enter the borrowing market, it will do so.

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

27. From Councillor Thomas to Councillor Price– Refugees

Does the Leader share my frustration at the Government's abject failure to allow unaccompanied children languishing in the French refugee camps in Calais and Dunkirk to enter the UK, and can he please share what steps Oxford City Council is taking to pressure the Government and assist the County Council to move matters forward?

Response

Yes. It is probably reflective of a further hardening of the Government's policy stance that only 30 children have so far been admitted as a result of the Dubs amendment. We have been working very closely and successfully with the County Council and Asylum Welcome over the past year in both the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and the resettlement of unaccompanied children. Ten families (45 people) have been successfully resettled under the SVPRS; the County Council has dealt with in excess of 50 children, but has had to resettle some of them with families living outside Oxfordshire. We recently responded to a letter from the new Home Office Minister indicating our willingness to resettle a further ten families in 2017 which could include children identified as vulnerable, and to continue our joint work with the County on resettling children under any of the schemes, including the Dubs amendment group. The imminent dismantling of the Calais camp implies that this is an urgent issue.

Supplementary question

Where are the bottlenecks in resettling unaccompanied children? Is it with the recruitment of foster families or is there a funding shortfall?

Response

There is a more general problem in recruiting foster careers. The county has over 60 refugee children placed in care and there is not much more that can be for directly. The rate for support and questions about what happens at the end of the fifth year when support ends has been raised with government but we have not had a reply. We can take and fund 10 families in 2017 but the long term situation is uncertain.

28. From Councillor Simmons to Councillor Price– Junior Doctors

At the time of writing, a group of junior doctors (Justice for Health) are in court to oppose the imposition of a new 'unsafe and unsustainable' NHS contract on Junior Doctors by the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt. Will the Leader join me in sending a message of support to Justice for Health and encourage local people, who are able to afford to do so, to make a donation to their campaign at www.justiceforhealth.co.uk

Response

Yes; I would be very happy to do so. It is clear that the case put forward by the Secretary of State has been based on a misinterpretation of data relating to mortality rates for weekend admissions, and that there is grossly inadequate funding available to support the level of service demanded. The net effect will be to increase risk to patients, burn out rates for doctors and levels of out migration for trained medical staff.

Supplementary question

Will you join us in writing to the Secretary of State, the NHS Trust and junior doctors to support the case we make?

Response

Yes.

29. From Councillor Wade to Councillor Price– Housing provisions for Refugees

Could the Leader please confirm how many Syrian families have been accommodated in unfurnished privately rented accommodation in Oxford to date, and is he satisfied that the provision of furniture and equipment for these families that has been made through donations from individuals and community groups is sufficient without the need for additional financial provision by the City Council?

Response

Ten families have been accommodated in private rented accommodation under the SVPRS. In some cases, our Housing Needs teams have used funding from the Home Office allocations to supplement or improve the existing furniture and household equipment. Donations from the public via Emmaus, City of Sanctuary and Asylum Welcome have been very generous, and continue to be offered.