

Written response to questions submitted in accordance with council procedure rule 33

A. Question from Councillor David Bartholomew to Cabinet Member for planning, Councillor Anne-Marie Simpson

This Council must respond to Reading's Transport Consultation by the end of August. Three key elements that impact on South Oxfordshire are: 1) Third Thames Crossing; 2) North Reading Orbital (going through South Oxfordshire); 3) Three 'Park & Rides' to serve Reading but located in South Oxfordshire. The Cabinet's position on 1) is already agreed as a result of a Full Council decision last year, but what position is being taken with regard to items 2) and 3)?

Written response

The planning policy team is currently in the local plan examination hearings at which cross boundary work on transport with Reading is likely to form part of the discussion at the Matter 7 hearing session on 23 July. Officers will be seeking comments from all Councillors on Reading's Transport Strategy 2036 in tomorrow's councillor update. The Cabinet member for Planning will consider comments made and the council's position on such proposals and submit a response on behalf of the council by the end of August deadline. A copy of the response will be circulated, as usual, in the regular councillor update.

B. Question from Councillor David Bartholomew to Cabinet Member for finance, Councillor Leigh Rawlins

Now that we are moving out of lockdown, what is the timetable for recovering unspent funds from the Councillor COVID-19 Grant Scheme (March 2020)?

Written response

On 25 March 2020, we launched an Emergency Councillor Grant Scheme that gave each councillor £2,000 to award to community groups delivering community initiatives in their ward to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic, particularly those supporting vulnerable residents.

For audit purposes, we provided councillors with a spreadsheet for capturing and recording all the requests they receive and the awards they chose to make.

Councillors will be aware that officers have recently requested updates on their individual emergency councillor grant budgets, and to offer their support in connecting them with groups that still need funding towards their work supporting vulnerable residents.

As we ease out of lockdown, and in anticipation of the national shielding programme coming to an end on 1 August 2020 and the potential for a second response spike or wave of positive cases, it is our intention to keep the scheme open until the end of September 2020. By then, we'll hopefully have more certainty nationally that we're

in the recovery phase of the pandemic and officers can put a further call out for grant budget returns. It is at that point we're likely to recover any unspent funds if a second wave has not materialised and is considered unlikely.

C. Question from Councillor Caroline Newton to the Cabinet Member for planning, Councillor Anne-Marie Simpson

Given that the independent inspector's decision on the Local Plan 2034 is not anticipated much before the end of the year, could the Cabinet member for planning please clarify the timing of the stages of work towards a formal decision on Home England's application to develop Chalgrove Airfield, including the closing date for public consultation?

Written response

Due to the Local Plan 2034 Examination, the closing date for comments on the planning application will be extended to 1 September 2020. The target date for making a decision is currently 9 October 2020, however subject to the agreement of the applicant, this target decision date maybe extended. It is anticipated that officers will, when appropriate, seek an extension of time for a decision, recognising the timing of the Inspectors report on the Local Plan 2034 and that further transport information is required to fully assess the current submitted application.

D. Question from Councillor Caroline Newton to the Cabinet Member for housing and environment, Councillor David Rouane

At what point during the budget-setting process did the proposal of increasing charges for dog bins arise, and what consideration was given to the disproportionate financial impact this might have on smaller, rural parish councils?

Written response

As part of the budget setting process and in accordance with good financial management officers were asked to identify any revenue reductions and income generation ideas to address the council's current financial position. The prices have been increased to provide full cost recovery for this service to those council that use the service. The town and parish councils are under no obligation to use our service and can arrange for their bins to be emptied themselves. The increase in cost does not have a "disproportionate financial impact" on rural parish councils as the final cost relates to the number of bins in place. We have taken a stepped approach to the price increase in order to give towns and parishes time to assess whether or not they wish to use an alternative provider.

E. Question from Councillor Mocky Khan to the Leader of the council, Councillor Sue Cooper

The ruling group and the Leader have spoken many times that the council should be inclusive, decisions made collective and information shared. Can the Leader explain why despite numerous requests, Group Leaders have not been permitted to attend Cabinet Briefings? What are the reasons for the exclusions?

Written response

Firstly I would say that both I and fellow Cabinet members have enabled an increased number of all-councillor briefings on key issues such as the Local Plan, other planning issues, the growth deal and our new offices as we recognise the importance of all councillors being briefed on important issues affecting the council. The purpose of Cabinet briefing meetings is to confidentially brief Cabinet members collectively on issues that will be coming forward to the Cabinet and Cabinet members for decision to enable them to ask questions and request information to be included in reports when they come forward in public, recognising that all reports must reflect the professional advice and opinion of our officers. These forthcoming decisions are advertised on the Cabinet's work programme and where appropriate (e.g. developing policies) are brought to the Scrutiny Committee before consideration by the Cabinet or to full Council where the constitution requires it. In addition, I am aware that the chief executive meets regularly with all group leaders which provides them with an opportunity to be briefed on current and emerging issues and that information and updates are sent directly to relevant members by officers wherever required.

F. Question from Councillor Mocky Khan to the Cabinet Member for housing and environment, Councillor David Rouane

This council passed a motion regards Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) in July 2018. What progress has been made since? In addition, when is the feasibility study that was due for publication in January going to be released and what reassurance can be given to inform residents that CPE is high on the agenda?

Written response

No one can doubt the commitment of this administration to implementing CPE. It is included in our draft Corporate Plan and I have personally attended several meetings with town and parish councillors to discuss the matter and update them on progress. It is however a complicated project requiring many hours of officer time and involves many partners.

Discussions regarding CPE have been ongoing, and a working group of Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell District Councils agreed to jointly investigate the feasibility of implementing CPE within each

District. The feasibility study has been commissioned and undertaken by RTA Associates who are experienced in Civil Parking Enforcement. OCC officers are currently seeking feedback from Department of Transport prior to the preparation of any detailed programme for the introduction of CPE. OCC and each of the Districts will then need to seek Cabinet approval for the application to be made based on the recommendations of the final report. We are aiming to seek all of the relevant approvals by October 2020.

Assuming the proposal is approved by all authorities CPE could be brought into effect by November 2021.

G. Question from Councillor Mocky Khan to the Cabinet Member for Didcot Garden Town, Councillor David Rouane

On 25 June, I read about the Didcot Gateway Project being withdrawn/amended in the Oxford Mail. Can the Cabinet member explain why South Oxfordshire District Councillors, Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board or the Didcot Town Council were not informed and had to read the article to find out? Also, what reassurance can the Cabinet member give to ensure key stakeholders will be consulted before future decisions are made in regard to Didcot Garden Town?

Written response

Having reviewed the article since receiving this question, it does not appear to include anything significant that was not already in the public domain. It states that a planning application had been withdrawn and that Homes England was expected to submit a new one.

Whilst the district council Planning Committee made a resolution to grant the 2015 application by South Oxfordshire District Council, the legal agreement did not progress at that time as it involved a range of third-party landowners across a wider site area. Most of the site is now owned by Homes England and is designated within the emerging Local Plan as the location for 300 new homes and so it is reasonable to assume that a new plan would be forthcoming from them.

The one new item in the article was that the 2015 planning application had been withdrawn. This application was withdrawn as part of an internal housekeeping matter, given it had become out of date in terms of policy, design guidance, viability and deliverability. This was undertaken in advance of a new application that we understand will shortly be submitted by Homes England.

Over the last couple of years council officers have worked closely with Homes England to support the development of a new viable masterplan that aligns with the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan. Homes England has now started their public engagement on their new outline application, and they have notified the key stakeholders. Unfortunately, their planning consultants sent an email to ward councillors around the Didcot Garden Town area prior to the public engagement starting, without our knowledge, and before we had formally signed off any proposals or seen any finalised communications. As a result, and given the important nature of the site, officers have arranged a briefing for all district councillors on 17 July, where Homes England will talk through their application in more detail.

The Didcot Garden Town Team remains committed to transparency and consultation through the recently re-formed Advisory Board and the new Sounding Boards and we are disappointed that the new application was handled in the way that it was.