

Public Document Pack

Council 18 July 2019 – Written responses to questions and supplementary questions submitted by councillors

1. Question from Councillor Mocky Khan to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

One of the key frustrations of residents is inappropriate and illegal parking. This is certainly the case for Didcot and other parts of South Oxfordshire. Didcot Town council passed a motion on Civil Parking Enforcement on 30 July 2018 and this council did too, on 19 July 2018. Can the Cabinet Member, please give an update on where we are on this? What actions have taken place, if any? Also, how can we accelerate this? Residents want and need an update.

Answer

Councillor Khan is right to draw the distinction between inappropriate and illegal parking.

With regard to illegal parking, the county council are leading on a joint project to carry out a feasibility study of civil parking enforcement in South, Vale and Cherwell. They have appointed RTA associates to carry out the study. RTA are highly reputable in this area and have helped over 180 local authorities with CPE feasibility studies and implementations. We are due to meet RTA for a start up meeting next week and RTA should provide a draft report within three months and so officers are aiming to bring an update to cabinet by Christmas.

In the meantime, enforcement remains the responsibility of the police and instances of illegal parking, particularly where this is dangerous should still be reported to them. It was reported at the Police & Crime Panel meeting in June that TVP currently has 70 vacancies for PCSOs and so this was preventing them from responding to issues such as parking offences. Some councils have sought to offset this by funding a PCSO for their own area. I believe that Didcot Town Council has done this in the past. However, having spoken to the councillor responsible for this scheme in Cherwell, it has not proved satisfactory as the police are understandably reluctant to allow local councillors to determine the operational priorities of their officers.

There is the further issue of what some residents regard as inappropriate parking. This may be long term parking by commuters or town centre workers in residential streets. This has led to the call for further parking restrictions or residential parking permits in some areas. The Didcot Garden Town team are looking at a parking strategy for the town to address these issues.

No supplementary question

2. Question from Councillor Jane Murphy to Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of the council

Over the last year good governance has been a key priority for the council. Can the Leader confirm that this is still as important to the administration and she is doing all she can to continue to lead this forward?

Answer

I can confirm that the good governance journey the council has been on over the last two years remains a key priority not just for this administration, but for whole the council. I acknowledge the findings of the programme governance review reported to the joint audit and governance committee in January and March of this year, and I wholeheartedly support the actions already identified to address the governance concerns. However, there is still work to do to maintain the momentum in improving our governance arrangements and culture, and my administration and I will continue to work with and support officers and members in moving this forward.

Supplementary question

It's good to hear that the Leader is in agreement of continuing the good governance implemented over the past year and good to know she understands what good governance is.

Could she confirm to the council that she wrote to the Henley Standard as the Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, published on 5 June, when she had no authority from Council to do so to comment on the validity of Neighbourhood Plans and to apologise for a district councillor and will she be putting an apology in the Henley Standard to put this right and make it clear she was either speaking as leader of the Liberal Democrat's or in her role as a district councillor as she promised in correspondence between her and myself.

Answer to supplementary question

It is self-evident that I wrote to the Henley Standard about Neighbourhood Plans as the article is here for all to read.

I wrote this after consulting with South Oxfordshire District Council planning officers who specialise in Neighbourhood Plans and with our MP John Howell who, as you know, has a strong interest in promoting Neighbourhood Plans and had checked with *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government*.

My letter was to provide clarification of a factual matter.

I did say that next time I write to the Henley Standard I will make clear whether or not I am writing as leader, but I did not promise to write to the Henley Standard again on this subject and it is certainly too late to do so now. There are more pressing issues to be dealt with.

Let us all try to work more positively for the good of the people of South Oxfordshire in future.

3. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

Henley has a limit of three hours parking with no return. Shop and office workers should be using the long stay car parks in Henley. When will South Oxfordshire District Council's car parks have machines that stop people feeding them or insist that the car park attendants ticket cars which extend their visits beyond three hours?

Answer

We are working with our car park provider Saba on systems that will prohibit users from being able to purchase a length of stay over the limit of three hours. This includes ANPR (automatic number plate recognition). However, finding a reliable and enforceable solution is proving complicated.

Supplementary question

The new pay machines have been in place for a good two years. Why were machines ordered that could not carry out the procedure of notifying drivers they could only park for a maximum of three hours? Please give dates of meetings that have taken place over the past two years to resolve this problem?

Answer to supplementary question

When the original contract was let, the South Councils' existing Pay and Display equipment was ageing, and Indigo set out a proposal to refresh all equipment. The new machines offered card payments via both Chip & PIN and contactless payment. They also included vehicle registration entry, requiring users to enter their registration number when purchasing a ticket. This offered two benefits, firstly, it prevented motorists from passing on tickets and secondly it will facilitate the ANPR vehicle technology which we are proposing to introduce.

Pay and display machines have limited software capabilities, albeit we are working with Saba to work with the suppliers to develop software to deliver our requirements.

The South and Vale technical services manager meets monthly with the Saba contract manager to manage the delivery of the contract. In addition, quarterly meetings are held to review KPIs and strategic issues. These meetings are attended by the Head of Service and Saba's regional commercial manager. I have not listed the specific dates however I can confirm that the meetings have occurred as agreed and are scheduled to the end of the year. The meter feeding issue is a current agenda item. At the last meeting we were advised that pay by phone were starting trials towards the end of this week, to stop users purchasing another 3 hours once the first 3 hours have lapsed, in Kings Road and Greys Road. I hope to be able to give you more information on this early next week.

4. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

When is decriminalised parking enforcement going to happen and is Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) in agreement?

Answer

As for Q1, no decision can be made until we have the results from the feasibility study to make an informed decision. We need to know in more detail the associated costs and agree a way forward with OCC.

Supplementary question

Decriminalised parking enforcement is at the forefront of the majority of towns in the District.

How many meetings have taken place between OCC and South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) on the subject?

What is meant by a 'feasibility study'?

What are 'associated costs'?

What do SODC need to agree with OCC?

Quite simply, Henley Town Council is ready to take over on street parking enforcement; they already carry out an on street Residents Parking Scheme for OCC.

Answer to supplementary question

The councils on the cross-authority working group (South, Vale, Cherwell, and OCC) have agreed to jointly oversee a feasibility study that will review options for rolling out CPE across the whole of the county road network as well as off-street car parks.

The study will look at cost/benefit studies from other areas in the county and produce several options for potential future models of CPE. The results of the study will be reviewed by the working group and then taken through the respective council's decision-making processes to determine the plan for a potential future application for such powers to the Department of Transport (DfT). We anticipate that the study will be completed by the end October.

As yet we have not allocated any funding to deliver CPE only the cost of the study which will be covered within an existing revenue budget of £30,000.

At the South council meeting the council agreed in principle to submit a formal request to the county council to delegate civil parking enforcement to the districts. This request was submitted on the 6 July and OCC have agreed that subject to the outcome of the above process they will apply to the Department of Transport under the Traffic Management Act 2004 for a Civil Enforcement Area Order and if granted delegate it under a service level agreement to each of the districts.

Once the feasibility study is completed and if the process is signed off by all parties as the highway authority, OCC will need to carry out a full survey of all traffic regulation orders.

It is likely that any further residents parking schemes would first be subject to the implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) which would enable the district to enforce parking contravention.

5. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

In 1992 and 2016 plans were drawn up for another floor on the Kings Road Car Park, for some reason nothing happened, why? We now have another 12 shops being built next to the Kings Road car park but no extra spaces, why? South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) draw over £700,000 from their three main car parks in Henley and has some £6 million of CIL money for infrastructure. Now has to be the time to build the extra 95 spaces that were proposed in the 2016 drawings. When can this be started?

Answer

In 2015 council engineering contractors estimated the budget cost at £720,000 for the creation of 65 additional spaces in Kings Road car park on a single deck. The project was never progressed due to the high cost for a return of a relatively modest number of extra spaces. (Note - Officers have checked the plan which shows an extra 65 bays rather than 95).

Supplementary question

When Henley Town Council councillors and officers met with SODC officers, we were informed the drawing showed 95 spaces, even if the drawing did not I am sure a scheme could come forward that could show 95.

A new development is taking place at the rear of the Kings Road car park, which will house 12 new shops, but no extra car parking space.

In 1992 a proposal was put forward by SODC to put another deck on the Kings Road car park, this was followed up in 2015 by another scheme (It is suggested 65 spaces). If spaces were need then why not now?

I was informed many years ago that Henley's two main car parks are on average 95% full, this allows for movement of 5% cars moving in and out, in theory they are 100% full. Since 1992 I would suggest there have been well over 200 new properties built in Henley (probably even more), 500 are being built in the Neighbourhood Plan and another 350 proposed in the NP review. Well over 1000 new properties but no extra car parking spaces. Shops need footfall.

It is suggested the council engineers have put forward a budget cost of £720.000 for creation of 65 additional spaces and only a modest return would be shown.

A car park space in Henley between 10am and 5pm costs some £4 per day, longer on a Saturday. Multiply by 6 days (no charge Sunday but this could change) then 52 weeks and you have £1,248. Multiply by 65 and you have £81,120 (eighty one thousand one hundred and twenty pounds). That gives about a 12% return, not bad. 95 spaces even more!! What figures are SODC working on?

The facts show an excellent return, the question now is when will SODC start to process a new deck on the Kings Road car park, with Solar Panels, Electric Charging Points and a Living Wall.?

If this does not happen then the new shops will fail.

SODC take £700.000 out of Henley' car parks every year!!

Answer to supplementary question

The 2015 report produced by Monson refers to 65 spaces and would need to be reviewed to reflect increased construction costs.

The first question is do we want to attract additional vehicles into the centre of Henley? Taking into consideration feedback from planners and the concerns of the Air Quality Team if the answer is no then to address the problem we must seek alternative solutions. On balance we think that we should reconsider the issue and encourage drivers to use the car parks on the edge of town (Station, Rugby club) which may be achieved by working with the county council to improve signage.

6. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of the council

Is it now not time to allow the local ward councillors to take part in the debate and vote on applications in their ward at Planning Committee meetings? This works in other district councils. Can you confirm that this will be considered as part of the forthcoming review of the constitution?

Answer

I can confirm that this issue will be considered as part of the forthcoming review of the constitution scheduled for the autumn.

Supplementary question

It is encouraging that South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) will consider changing the Constitution to allow the local member to sit in at planning meetings so that they can offer the correct information and also vote. The public expect this. It works in other authorities why not SODC?

What would be the timelines for this and which committee would it go to?

Answer to supplementary question

A review of the constitution will start in October. Proposals will be considered by a cross-party Constitution Review Group and a report will be brought to full Council for consideration. The proposed scope of the review and the timetable for it will be presented to the Review Group. I anticipate that a report will be brought to Council between December and May, depending on the agreed scope of the review.

7. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor Robin Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration

The Market Place Mews development is having a drastic effect on trade in the town due to only one entrance being used. There is no good reason why the other entrance cannot be reopened. Can this entrance be reopened?

Answer

The car park entrance to the south west of Kings Road car park has been closed to safely facilitate the redevelopment of Market Place Mews. This entrance is used to allow access for construction traffic, and to separate this traffic from public vehicles and pedestrians within the car park. There remains an exit on to Bell Street to the east of the car park, as well as the main entrance/exit to the north west. The car park exit to the south west of the car park will be closed until Spring 2020 and will be put back into public use as soon as possible.

Supplementary question

My question was about the entrance not the exits.

This needs a site visit to determine a correct answer? There is ample room to open the original entrance and not the exit. The car park at present is turning shoppers away from Henley, this needs to be rectified now not in a year's time?

Answer to supplementary question

The council's project manager (from Cushman and Wakefield) attended a site visit with Henley town councillors, including Councillor Ken Arlett, on Wednesday 24 April 2019. If helpful, officers are willing to arrange a further site meeting with the contractor to listen to Councillor Arlett's concerns.

The entrance to the south of the car park is closed to enable segregation of the construction traffic from the public, for safety reasons. It is also to facilitate the exit of Waitrose lorries from the car park. Based on the tracking provided by the contractor Murphys, there would not be enough space to safely allow the use of the entrance/exit for construction traffic, exit for Waitrose lorries and the entrance of public vehicles simultaneously, given the width of that stretch of road. To date, neither the council nor the contractor has received any complaints about the temporary car park arrangement from businesses or shoppers.

8. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Cabinet member for planning

If Cabinet recommends option three to withdraw the Local Plan, what effect will this have on neighbourhood plans and the four major towns?

Answer

Councillor, first of all I should note that this is a hypothetical question and not tonight's proposal.

I would refer you to the statements issued both by John Howell MP and by SODC on the security of Neighbourhood Plans. **Furthermore**, I would highlight the recently

issued Housing Land Supply statement demonstrating a very robust supply of 9.75 years.

Neighbourhood Plans – at the time of examination - must be in “general conformity” with the strategic policies of the extant Local Plan. In South Oxfordshire that is the Core Strategy and saved development management policies from SOLP 2011. Whilst Examiners may have regard to any emerging Local Plan, it would **not** form a fundamental part of the process. Consequently the effect of withdrawal on ‘made’ or emerging NPs would be of **very minor** significance.

Clearly any new Local Plan – be it the current emerging LP2034 **or** a revision say under option 3 - will **automatically** supersede any NP made under the Core Strategy – but really only to the extent that the policy of the new and superior LP has policy that is in some way **in conflict** with the made NP. In most cases any conflict or risks will be extremely modest.

However, under eLP2034 as is, it would give local communities plenty of time to do a review of their NP and address any net pending allocation needs. I would expect the same with any revision. We should note that the NET pending needs under LP2034 were VERY limited with quite a lot of development already committed – including from infills and s78 appeal permissions. **Moreover**, NPs will be permitted to include a conservative estimate of FUTURE windfalls and infills in their review to meet their net outstanding allocation.

4 towns (and NPs)

Since the advent of housing formulas, if an LPA has a very sound HLS – as we securely do - then the origins of the housing targets in an extant Local Plan, our Core Strategy – are nowadays of scant significance. So the impact of out-of-dateness has become rather....wellout-of-date!

The Core Strategy was made policy-compliant with NPPF1 **prior** to adoption so there is also thus very **limited** policy exposure, even though the CS is now more than 5 years old. Indeed, it is the **fact** that it is more than 5 years old that guarantees our secure recourse to the formulas of the Standard Method! Thank God!

The four towns currently have housing requirements identified in the Core Strategy. In Didcot and Wallingford this took the form of site allocations (Didcot Northeast and West of Wallingford ‘Site B’). For Henley-on-Thames and Thame, this took the form of a housing requirement to be met through either a neighbourhood plan or the Site Allocations DPD (DPD work ceased to allow start on the Local Plan 2034). These settlements have now met the housing requirement for their area, either through Core Strategy allocations, neighbourhood plan allocations, or other permissions.

Provided the Council can demonstrate a sufficient land supply against a requirement in the absence of a new Local Plan, then the four towns would remain protected from speculative development. Obviously independent Planning Inspector do have authority to make decisions – but must do so with regard to the evidence, housing land supply and any exceptional factors.

For Didcot, there is a particular issue with HIF funding. This funding will address severe infrastructure issues which exist now around the town, where there is no other funding in place to address and it supports the emerging local plan. Clearly there is a benefit in the HIF funded roads and UK Gov and County have recognised those benefits.

The Cabinet's recommended approach is to take time to seek suitable flexibilities to proceed with HIF before proceeding to give effect to the mandate of the district's electorate to address deep concerns with eLP2034 and ones which do have a serious planning basis on several grounds.

The situation with Didcot was that past allocations under what has popularly been characterised as the "Dump on Didcot" approach turned out to be beyond the road capacity to sustain it! Who knew? Modelling South Oxfordshire's overburdened rural road network has become ever more fiendishly complex. For this reason it seems that no one until more recently recognised the problem at Didcot – when finally the dire situation of the A34 and the South Oxfordshire road network has become recognised and admitted. It is systemically overburdened.

Bizarrely some have suggested that the solution would be a Midsomer Motorway from the Felixstowe docks through our district to Bristol and Southampton - together with a million new homes of London overspill - to generate more traffic and finally **fix** the South Oxfordshire road network!

In my view the Expressway sub-route B3 and its potential obligations are a serious threat that the disposition of sites in eLP2034 does nothing to contain. Option 1 carries some serious strategic risks.

Coming back to the fundamentals I would urge all of our communities to undertake Neighbourhood Plans and undertake periodic reviews to keep them up to date. They **do** take a lot of work (and I speak from experience), but a great deal has been learned and the first one for a neighbourhood is always the hardest. But thereafter the model can be updated much more readily.

So, on balance I think there is a strong net reason to fix the emergent Local Plan. However, as yet, Cabinet's recommendation tonight is rather different!

Supplementary question

It was suggested at the meeting that there would be no effect on the NP if the Local Plan was withdrawn, this was the view of the Cabinet member for planning, am I correct?

Answer to supplementary question

Actually, the response to Councillor Khan specifically related to the Goring NP – which was being made as a new NP. In regard to the Goring Neighbourhood Plan, it is in general conformity with the Core Strategy. To withdraw the emerging Local Plan 2034 would have no effect on the, now, 'made' Neighbourhood Plan.

9. Councillor Ken Arlett to Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Cabinet member for planning

Where can Henley Town Council use the £800,000 for affordable housing from the McCarthy and Stone Development in Reading Road, Henley? At what date does this cease if it is not used?

Answer

To date £80,000 (of the £800,000 due) has been paid by the developer, with the remainder to be paid on the occupation of the 26th property in line with the S106 agreement. The £80,000 received should be spent within ten years (September 2028), whilst the outstanding £720,000 will also be required to be spent with ten years from the date it is received. As the monies are in lieu of affordable housing, they can only be used for the provision of housing within Henley and surrounding villages.

Supplementary question

If as stated the £800,000 for affordable homes can be used in Henley and surrounding villages, could SODC/HTC buy houses on an existing site or does it have to go through a housing association, if so how does that work?

Answer to supplementary question

This money is for use by the district council to enable the delivery of new affordable homes. SODC could, in principle, acquire houses using this S.106 contribution. At present, the council does not own any affordable housing, and does not therefore, have the immediate ability to manage and maintain homes in any significant number. The quickest, and most straightforward way to deliver affordable housing using these monies would be through a Registered Provider (housing association), with a legal agreement between the council and the Registered Provider which would secure the council's nomination rights.

Following the motion to Council on 18 July 2019, officers are working on a report for Cabinet on ways to use council powers and resources to deliver more high-quality, environmentally sustainable, and genuinely affordable housing, at social rent or similar cost. This will include looking at ways to keep such properties genuinely affordable in the long term and ways to release and access low-cost suitable land for projects such as – but not limited to - self-build, housing co-ops and community land trusts, as well as projects owned, let or operated by the council itself.

10. Councillor Stefan Gawrysiak to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

South Oxfordshire District Council draw £700,000 of income from the Henley car parks. In the Greys Road Car Park, we have smelly stinking toilets that were due for refurbishment in 2012. Can we have a commitment for £100,000 of spend for this renovation or a date for this to be done?

Answer

There is a project to refurbish the public toilets in Greys Road car park but unfortunately other projects have so far taken priority. I will be meeting with officers to discuss a long term strategy for the provision of public toilets given the cost to clean and maintain them, and to consider other ways of providing the service.

No supplementary question

11. Councillor Stefan Gawrysiak to Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Cabinet member for planning

If the South Oxfordshire Local Plan is withdrawn and rewritten can I have a cost estimate of the amount of money, staff costs and time that it would take for the rewrite and submission?

Answer

Councillor, again I would note that this is a hypothetical question.

I would also make the point that estimates have already been provided in reports to both Scrutiny (on which you sit) and Cabinet. These estimates as provided have been generic and blind to any specific in any such revision. They are general guesstimates made as a broad ball-park.

Clearly large values have been wasted previously in pursuit of objectives remote from the interests of our residents and those represent large sunk costs. Pulling the wrecked vehicle out of the ditch and fixing it up as best as may be - to carry the **true** interests of our residents again - would have a cost for the new administration – but one for which there is I believe a solid mandate.

An option 3 would imply withdrawal from examination, making changes within the scope of a Regulation 19 consultation – i.e. not introduce radical new subject areas for the plan to cover - and the Council would then submit a revised plan to the Secretary of State for examination. There are different potential scopes within an option 3 which would affect what is involved. The ball-park estimates – not based on any specific approach suggested that Option 3 may cost approximately £500,000 to £600,000 over a 14 month period. Submission of the Plan was estimated to be February 2021 and adoption of the Plan was estimated to be in January 2022.

An option 4 would imply withdrawal from examination. Under this option the Council will restart the plan making process – potentially from scratch! This will allow the Council, if it wishes, to prepare a significantly different plan (subject to compliance with the law, and national policies and guidance). The Council would need to undertake at least two consultations (Regulation 18 and 19) before submitting the new plan for examination. The ball-park estimates – not based on any specific approach - suggested that Option 4 may cost approximately £2million. Submission of the plan was estimated to be in July 2022 and adoption of the Plan is estimated to be in April 2023.

Staff costs Staff costs are met from within the existing planning policy budget, though in 2018 the resource focussed on the South Oxfordshire Local Plan was 11.5 FTE, even reaching 16FTE including temporary and

contract resources at peak times. Currently there are vacancies and officer resource is reduced – by half.

Given the likely links between eLP2034 and other future risks to **all** that our district holds dear from the arc and 2050 the stakes are **very** high.

Some folks had thought that the old administration may have known the price of everything and the value of nothing. However, having now seen something of their financial and contractual dealings it would seem that even **that** would rather flatter what took place?

I would suggest that the timing and costs of a revision would be very much affected by the scope of changes made and the resources available.

The intent is to find **pragmatic** solutions.

A more **specific** costing and timing would come forwards at the appropriate time for any such decision.

No supplementary question

12. Question from Councillor Ian White to Councillor to Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and environment

The new low energy light bulbs are a great benefit in respect of reduced energy consumption, but their manufacture involves the use of chemicals that should be recycled. At present, the requirement is for these bulbs to be taken to the County Council's recycling centres for disposal and it is highly likely that residents are unaware of this requirement, disposing of their failed bulbs in the grey bins.

Will the Cabinet member consider a campaign to increase awareness of the need to recycle these light bulbs? Can the Administration look at more viable options for their collection, either at the kerb side or by arranging collection points with parish councils, as driving to the recycling centres to dispose of a few bulbs would be wasteful of energy, result in additional pollution and be unlikely to inspire co-operation from most residents?

Answer

It is not practical or economically viable to collect light bulbs from the kerbside using the existing collection fleet. It would require a separate vehicle that would need to drive the whole district just to collect what is likely to be very few bulbs. Residents can dispose of these bulbs safely at any of the Household Recycling Centres. They can also be taken to any of the Robert Dyas stores in the district. This can be done in conjunction with a visit for other purposes and does not require a separate journey by the resident and therefore it is not wasteful of energy or creating additional pollution.

As there are already suitable disposal points we would not be considering introducing any alternative arrangements at this time. We will of course continue to

remind residents where they should take these bulbs on the promotional material that we provide to residents and on our website.

No supplementary question

13. Question from Councillor Lynn Lloyd to Councillor Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Cabinet member for community services

In previous years, South Oxfordshire District Council has supported its communities by way of Capital, Revenue and Councillor Grant Schemes, and funding was included in the 2019-2020 Budget inherited by the new Administration. Can the Cabinet member for community services confirm that this funding will continue for the current year?

Answer

Funding was agreed as part of the 2019/20 budget setting process for capital projects, revenue and the councillor grants schemes. Officers are currently making improvements to the application, guidance and back office processes to improve the service for the applicant, officers processing the applications and decision makers.

We are planning to open the capital grant scheme in November 2019, subject to Cabinet approving updates to the policy to improve the process for applicants. This is scheduled for Cabinet in October. Our revenue scheme is currently closed, as we are in the third year of funding organisations we have already committed to up until 2020-21. We are planning to open the councillor grants scheme in August 2019.

Any future changes will be subject to the council's usual budget setting process and discussions to determine priorities in line with the new corporate plan for the period 2020-2024.

No supplementary question

14. Question from Councillor Lynn Lloyd to Councillor Andrea Powell, Cabinet member for corporate services

Can the Cabinet member for corporate services please confirm that the project to build the Council Offices at Crowmarsh is still on track?

Answer

The decision to progress our new office accommodation at Crowmarsh was made by Cabinet on 14 November 2017, and the budget provision to do so was approved at full Council on 23 November 2017. At that time, the indicative date for returning to our offices was outlined as March 2021 to align with our lease arrangements at Milton Park. However, this was always an ambitious date given the number of components and complexity of the project. The head of development and regeneration has successfully renegotiated the lease at Milton Park, and this has given us a much more reasonable timeframe to return to our new office accommodation in April 2022, for which we remain on track.

No supplementary question

15. Question from Councillor Celia Wilson to Councillor Leigh Rawlins, Cabinet member for planning

How do you propose that the interests of settlements of all sizes in South Oxfordshire may be championed against any speculative development which benefits the developer rather than the community?

a) immediately?

and

b) in the wake of any delay introduced into the planning process by forthcoming decisions of South Oxfordshire District Council regarding the Emerging Local Plan 2034?

Answer

Councillor,

To your questions,

Immediately –

Firstly, the district's Housing Land Supply (HLS) is robustly secure and, together with the extra security of Neighbourhood Plans is in a VERY strong place to resist and defeat speculators. Obviously, that is in part thanks to the sanity provided by the housing formulas – but also - to a great deal of wanton speculative development caused by the previous loss of the HLS. That loss was in large part caused by the profoundly flawed 2014 SHMA by GL Hearn.

A lot of s78 supply was occasioned by the past errors – including the past excessive approach to loading development onto Didcot. It is in part fair to say that delivery was undermined by the 2008 banking crash and credit crunch and it is also fair to note that certain large developers were empowered to game the market and pick off areas with higher house prices and higher land profits than Didcot could offer.

Since those days a lot of effort has belatedly gone into Didcot, its Garden Town project and rebuilding its brand and masterplan. Whilst there were mistakes there is also genuine strength in the preparatory work that has been done by officers to recover things.

Theoretically, any speculative development might have more opportunity outside the Green Belt and AONB, though frankly with a solid HLS the real risk is presently very slight indeed. Developers who try are likely to lose – and they know it. They have opportunities for easier pickings elsewhere.

On fixing the disliked eLP2034 –

We have been advised that we have well in excess of three years of HLS unrelated to any road-linked sites; an extreme assumption but one which indicates how robust our position is. Just because we have a sound position is no cause for complacency and whilst there is some time it is not infinite. However even three years is plenty of time in which one could affect a controlled and limited scope Reg 19 fix under option

3. In my view much of the dire worst that was done by those content to throw the district under the Expressway bus and urbanise it through-out could be minimised.

In the recent past a wheeze to rustle up some funds for some roads was needed. That wheeze was to use yet more housing in Culham and elsewhere as funding bait! A proposal to promise more Greenfield and Green Belt land to fix the sins of the past! This is not to do other than recognise the very genuine employment case at Culham. However, at a price, I do believe that it would be possible to deliver HIF and to fix the eLP such that we try to respect the views of residents, respect democracy and seek to recover the past cavalier approach to Didcot. Nonetheless, I understand that compromises will be necessary.

The reason that the HLS supply drops to 5.17 years supply IF adoption of the eLP2034 as currently constituted is assumed is because we would migrate from a formula target of 632 per annum to a Plan target of 775 per annum for the district plus, from 2021 an extra 495 per annum – so 1270 per annum from 2021. As we would approach 2021 more of our 5 forward years would be represented by the 1270 level. You have of course seen a speculative view that if we rolled the dice and got sixes for each one, all our sites came in perfectly on trajectory, that the construction industry had enough capacity to deliver these exotic numbers alongside every other demand from surrounding areas and IF an unproven and unique view on beneficial counting of oversupply applied then we **might**, just, maintain an above 5 year supply in the years after adoption.

That would be always supposing that developers, seeing us teetering on the edge did not find it amusing and profitable to withhold such supply and press forward assaults on those highly profitable, attractive and sensitive sites from which they had been **excluded!** Many of them do not like a Plan-led world and when they can't curry favour prefer to have Local Planning Authorities in a position of **lacking** a sound HLS and thus to enjoy a presumption in favour of wildfire and speculative development.

A new Local Plan with ultra-urban densities to be applied in a draconian manner – insensitive to contexts and settings would be a concern. It could be a huge risk right across the board. Developers would enjoy a **golden** field day - as long as the **lack** of HLS could be made to last.

Coming up fast behind is the Oxfordshire 2050 model is a model of potential harm to all that residents of our district ever held dear. Some say that the targets for the arc are only perhaps 0.7 million and that “environmental protection and natural capacity” is top of the agenda. However developers drive numbers up and governments round everything up to simplistic sound-bites. So one million homes has now been widely stated as the basis. We are entitled to ask how much of the arc volume might come to Oxfordshire? How much would fall on South Oxfordshire? Would those pushing for a Midsomer Motorway then aim to drive a large share of Oxfordshire's “share” of such excess development onto South Oxfordshire? I would say wake up and pay attention to what is at stake!

These issues all link in to the risks of excess and speculative development that we face. We must be careful what we wish for!

So, what should be done?

Firstly, I would encourage all neighbourhoods to do a Neighbourhood Plan and recognise that if you can keep it up to date you will enjoy full protection under it from 2 years after it is made as long as the District has at least a 3 year HLS.

Secondly I would suggest that a progressive “coalition of the willing” get together and fix our Local Plan and stand stoutly together against the potential excesses that are at risk from Oxfordshire 2050’s growth obsession with inward migration and related assault to deny investment and GVA growth to the regions and the north.

Lord Kerslake and the UK 2070 Commission are right that it makes no economic sense to make vast subsidies from the South and East to the north and regions, to migrate population from regional areas **with** housing into a congested and economically over-heated South East where the development over Greenfield land associated with ultra-high growth is anathema. Better to drive investment and some of the fruits of a knowledge economy northwards to rebalance and truly kick-start the UK economy and its productivity? Long congested commutes are contrary to productivity, economic, social and environmental objectives!

Thirdly any correction of the eLP2034 should probably be over a constrained scope and timescale. Aims may be to reduce targets but enable appropriate strategic sites to come forwards and not be delayed for too long. This then will assist in creating the right conditions for a sustainable supply of housing land that **can** be delivered in an ongoing way.

All appropriate effort should be made to put the very proper case that the Oxford unmet need was grossly overstated by GL Hearn in the SHMA process and that the reality without double-counting and inappropriate leaps is much less. (The Standard Method formulas over a 20 year period suggest only 15k (not 28k) – a much more credible relationship to Oxford City’s 2011 housing stock of 58k. However, even if that were uplifted for some constrained Household growth to something like 18k or at most 20k it would make more sense than the tortured SHMA. Oxford can supply something in the 10-12k range for themselves, and finally quite a lot of supply for Oxford emigres and City workers has ALREADY been provided by surrounding districts including South Oxfordshire. Indeed, many already live in Didcot and elsewhere and are already in our Household numbers and already priced in by the Standard Method into our formula-based targets! Such needs should NOT be double-counted!

With a lower target in our eLP and with targets for the Oxford unmet need spread over 15 years we would benefit from a much sounder Local Plan with a more secure delivery trajectory?

Failure to act, would in my eyes risk losing our 5-year HLS in the years ahead and suffering wildfire speculative development.

Moreover, there is the risk of inviting in the Expressway through our district where it does not belong! It risks bringing a mass of development that would represent a sea change in the character of our area and risk doubling Didcot.

The appropriate way forward is via the East-West rail upgrade, with rail-freight and inter-modal links!

If REAL speculative development were to be released by retaining the current Local Plan - and rather inevitably losing its HLS - then it would in my view unleash speculation upon all areas. Attempts would be made in the Green Belt and AONB just as much as in other areas. It would, however, be contained in part by Neighbourhood Plans.

I think that everyone here knows what a lack of HLS means. It means a "tilted balance" whereby there is more of a presumption in favour of developers, a reduced weight for Local Plan housing policies and where defence is largely by reference to the more permissive standards of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). These somewhat protect areas or assets of particular importance (such as Green Belt, AONB or SSSIs etc) which can provide a clear reason for refusing the development proposed; provided that any adverse impacts of such development would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the NPPF taken as a whole. We do not want the district to return to all that nonsense.

We all want a Plan-led approach for our whole District that **really** reflects democratic input. The present one was driven by the time-pressed exigencies of outside forces – forces with no particular care or love for our district. **We** should believe in better.

Sometimes people suggest that there is only risk in **doing** something. In my view very often the greatest risk is in doing **nothing**. Complexity and problems of our inherited situation will take calm application to put right. I would call on those members who **care** about our district to join those of us engaged in seeking a **better** way.

By establishing an appropriate Local Plan we can have a proper Plan-led approach that delivers housing land supply AND for the residents and settlements of our district.

Supplementary question

Thank you for your very full response to my question relating to the championing, in the immediate future, of settlements vulnerable to unhelpful speculative development. I speak particularly of Didcot in this supplementary question.

Your assertions are

1. That GL Hearn SHMA calculations were incorrect in 2014
2. Your claimed robustness of the district's Housing Land Supply (HLS) and that as you put it, "the real risk is presently very slight indeed" and
3. That developers would find "easier pickings elsewhere".

My question related to the immediate situation and the delay in achieving "a proper Plan-led approach"(as you put it) which resulted from Council's votes on 18th July. Your proposals for future action are long-term and uncertain.

I would further ask therefore:

A. What is your evidence for assertion 3?

This assertion does not seem to correspond to the lived situation in Didcot which

many believe to be very vulnerable to speculation.

(note that some 4600 houses have been built or are being built on great Western Park and the North East Didcot estates with planning permission, and more are in the pipeline near Tesco and Vauxhall Barracks. This indeed would seem to constitute, as you put it, an "excessive approach to loading development in Didcot", which you describe as a "cavalier approach")

B what practical steps can be taken NOW to avoid adding inappropriate speculative development to the building load already present?

(Note that Didcot lacks a neighbourhood plan and cannot achieve one quickly)

Answer to supplementary question A

Unlike our Council, many do not have a sound Housing Land Supply and are vulnerable to speculative applications. I cannot answer for planning permissions granted in the past – before my time! Furthermore, I note most of the sites mentioned were deliberate allocations in South Oxfordshire District Council's Core Strategy and were not in fact speculative applications.

Answer to supplementary question B

The premise of your supplementary questions relates explicitly to Didcot. Your question emphasises "NOW", implying in the very short term. Frankly the answer to that is very little. Didcot is not currently exposed to speculative development risks.

16. Question from Councillor David Bartholomew to Councillor David Turner, Cabinet member for finance

Now that he has been in post for two months could the Cabinet Member for Finance please confirm what steps he is taking to produce a balanced budget for 2020/21 without having to draw on reserves?

Answer

I was somewhat surprised to get this question as for the last eight years the Conservative administrations in SODC have been using the substantial reserves which they inherited from the Lib Dem/Labour coalition to balance the budget and the Medium Term Financial Plan. Do you really expect the coalition in two months to immediately set a balanced budget for the next year when the ruling group has weakened the financial position of SODC and that despite the section 151 officer pointing out that this cannot go on for ever? SODC is now in a position where it will run out of uncommitted usable reserves in approximately 7 years' time according to the advice of our financial officers. We therefore need to take action to turn the situation round over the coming years. SODC will spend over £3M more than the revenue it is taking in during the current financial year. As staff costs are nearly 70% of the budget to do this immediately would be equivalent to removing over 30% of staff from SODC. Clearly this is not possible and in particular following the external auditor's advice we actually increased staff quite recently. The problem lies in the last eight years when the ruling Conservative Group either reduced Council Tax, had a zero increase in Council Tax or in the case of the last two years put it up by the maximum that the Government would allow. SODC has a band D council tax of £122 compared with the average Shire Districts £185 per band D property. This failure to

put up council tax to cover inflation is the reason why, in seven years' time, SODC could be facing the same sort of difficult financial situations as some other councils are now facing if corrective actions are not taken.

So, what are we going to do? Firstly, I have asked all heads of service to look their fees and charges to see what opportunities there may be to raise extra revenue. I have asked that they look at other Shire Districts fees and charges to see what they do and what scope that gives us. All heads of service will be asked to look at savings which can be delivered in the first year's budget for 2020/21. We will look at whether another examination similar to "Fit for the future" should take place. In addition, we need to look at all external contracts that are due for re-negotiation during the MTFP. We will also be looking at using our reserves in investment projects which will give us a good return as did the loan to SOHA which returns over 4% per annum way above any of our normal financial market investments. Given the weakened financial situation the last administration has left this council in, balancing the budget over the Medium Term Financial Plan period is not going to be easy but it has to be done. It may involve unpopular measures, but the alternative which have faced and are facing other councils is not an option I want to contemplate. Not putting up Council Tax may have been good for votes but as I warned so many times in the last eight years it cannot go on.

No supplementary question

17. Question from Councillor Ian Snowdon to Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of the council and Cabinet member for Didcot Town

Can the leader confirm that she intends to continue to encourage the extremely good working relationship that South Oxfordshire District Council has built up with Homes England in the last year and in particular with regards Didcot Garden Town.

Answer

Yes. I am very happy for the council to continue to work closely with Homes England. We support the garden town projects and will actively pursue their implementation.

No supplementary question

18. Question from Councillor Anna Badcock to Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of the Council

What measures will the leader bring in to improve Air Quality Management Areas in South Oxfordshire and in what timescale?

Answer

The air quality in our District has continued to improve with reductions in Nitrogen Dioxide level in each of the Air Quality Management areas recorded in 2018. Overall there has been a reduction from 2017 in 79% of our monitoring sites.

During 2019 we will continue to implement the measure identified in the council's Air Quality Action Plan and Low Emissions Strategy which will include:

- *promoting our successful anti-idling Campaign: "Turn it Off" by engaging with local schools, medical practices and businesses.*
- *publish updated Air Quality Planning Guidance*
- *complete a feasibility study looking at the possibility of additional charging points in car parks and council properties*
- *and provide eco-driver training for council employees.*

As Councillor Badcock will be aware from being part the previous administration, local air quality is a complex topic impacted by a number of different factors influencing it on the local level. These include weather conditions, traffic volumes and flows, age and makeup of the vehicle fleets, driver behaviour and transport mode choice, and the geographic makeup of our market towns and villages. A number of these issues are beyond the local District Council's control, partly owing to their nature and also partly owing to how the air quality legislation is defined.

What seems obvious is that we need to do more to try and get people and goods out of cars, vans, lorries etc and using other forms of transport where possible. To do this we need to improve facilities for these other forms of transport

So, I hope you will support the motion on improving rail infrastructure.

I was encouraged by our involvement in the Ladies OVO sponsored cycle race through Oxfordshire recently saying that it would encourage more cycling. I hope this will be the case.

So, for cycle routes and other highways/traffic management issues it is essential that we work with our partner agencies especially OCC to develop ideas and plans to improve local air quality.

More certainly needs to be done.

No supplementary question