

Written responses to question – 14 December 2023

1. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council.

The council's six point corporate objectives include to "1, Protect and restore our natural world" and "3, Action on the Climate Emergency", and full of promises to "Invest responsibly and ethically with the Climate Emergency at the heart of what we do" along with to "Promote and encourage behavioural change with informational campaigns and **leading by example.**".

Can the leader advise if the purchase of a fleet of diesel vehicles is achieving these goals, and how residents should have any trust in the council to achieve any of its 6-point corporate plan if they will not **lead by example**?

Response

Thank you for the question, and the opportunity to outline what we have been doing regarding new waste vehicles.

Firstly it is worth reminding us all that any decision requires us to consider a number of our strategic priorities. In this case this includes not only those mentioned by Cllr Snowdon but also "Promote the circular economy (reduce, reuse and recycle)" which requires our waste collection service to be reliable, and "Exercise strong stewardship of all council assets" which requires us to make cost effective decisions.

It is useful to remind councillors that the council has a statutory obligation to ensure that waste and recycling collection services are offered to every household, and it would fail in this duty, and in its duties to all residents, if we were unable to undertake the hundreds of thousands of doorstep collections we provide on a weekly basis. The council therefore will undertake all endeavours to ensure that collections continue to take place, and maintain the high performing service that we currently have. Indeed a failure to operate a well-functioning collection service would not only put us at risk of legal challenge, but also potentially result in some valuable resources not being recycled but instead ending up in incineration.

As part of considering how these services will be provided beyond June of next year, the council is required to begin the purchase of new waste collection vehicles. These vehicles are required to replace existing vehicles as they come to the end of their life, and we have been made aware that some will not be economically viable to operate beyond next summer. Therefore we have placed orders for new vehicles that will work across both this district and Vale, with the aim of being as efficient and effective as possible. The council has taken the approach to purchase replacement vehicles in a phased approach as they reach the end of their life, rather than all together in one go, so that we can take maximum advantage of technology in this fast moving area.

At the time of placing orders, officers needed to consider a range of factors to ensure that the vehicles were able to operate immediately, and research was undertaken as part of the procurement process to understand what vehicles were available in the

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market and how any new purchase would meet the needs of the waste collection service next summer.

Unfortunately, the only widely available and affordable alternative to diesel powered vehicles at this time is electric fuelled trucks. Whilst such trucks are less polluting, and can be charged from sustainable fuel sources, these vehicles are still relatively new to the market, expensive and, most importantly would need to complete a round on a single charge and be charged at the end of each working day at the depot. The councils did test an electric waste vehicle in 2022 and found that, at that time, it did not fully meet the needs of the service. As time passes, the range of the vehicles will improve, and we are aware that Reading Borough Council has recently purchased five electric trucks, although they have a much smaller geographic area to cover than the district and will need a suitable place to charge each day.

When officers looked into the infrastructure required to charge all of these vehicles, it was found that it was not possible to do so safely at the current depot, which is the safe and legal place for them to be stored. Therefore, purchasing such vehicles would have resulted in them being unable to be charged in order to complete their rounds, making them non-operational. The council considers vehicle charging infrastructure on any property it operates from. This is subject to several key considerations, including the capacity of the local electricity network and fleet route optimisation. Future performance reports will continue to capture any progress made to improve infrastructure to provide on-going transparency around this matter.

I am pleased to confirm that we have jointly purchased one, smaller all electric vehicle to undertake food collections. As the smallest and lightest waste collection vehicle being purchased, it will be able to complete the necessary rounds, as well as access the limited overnight charging option at the current depot. It will give us an opportunity to test and learn about the operation of these vehicles in our area and will also show that we are leading in the journey to decarbonise the fleet. I am also pleased to confirm that all new diesel vehicles will be supplied to the latest Euro 6 engine standards, which means that they are cleaner and more efficient than the vehicles they are replacing on the current fleet.

Of course, it is disappointing that we are not able to provide more non-fossil fuel based vehicles at this time, and the approach to decarbonising our fleet is something I am expecting to see in a waste vehicle procurement strategy coming forward in the spring. However, it would be irresponsible of the council to purchase vehicles that cannot operate when needed, which would lead to the failure of vital services, resulting in poor health and environmental outcomes.

Finally, I am confident that this council will continue to lead by example as it brings forward its new waste and street cleansing strategy, and waste vehicle procurement strategy next year. Both of these will enable us to continue to provide the best services whilst aiming for the highest standards and leading the way on environmental change.

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2. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council

The council should be there to support our local businesses where possible. However, I recently had a business owner asking if it is normal to pay for a revisit for food hygiene rating in March and still be waiting in November. I assured him it wasn't and was astounded to find this to be true. With the fact that we carry out these visits annually in any case, will the Cabinet member agree with me that waiting nine months is completely unacceptable?

Response

The purpose of the Councils' Food & Workplace Safety Team is to ensure public safety and reduce the likelihood of food poisoning outbreaks from food consumed from food manufacturers to newsagents including all caterers. They aim to ensure that all food businesses within the district are providing safe food which is in compliance with the law and they do this by inspecting food premises on a risk basis laid down by the Food Standards Agency. Environmental Health officers issue the national food hygiene rating scheme stickers to all eligible food businesses and of the approx. 1250 food establishments in the district, over 60% of them achieve the highest rating of 5.

When a new food business is set up, the team inspect and provide the rating based upon the assessment of the professional officer during that visit. An establishment can challenge that rating, or can request a reinspection. When a reinspection is requested, the business will do so via our online form and generally the revisit happens swiftly (within 3 months).

Whilst Councillor Snowdon refers to a specific case, it is not appropriate in this forum to discuss the details of that case, but I would certainly agree with Councillor Snowdon that a waiting time of nine months for a return visit from our food safety team is unacceptable. Officers believe that this length of wait has only happened in a single case, which Councillor Snowdon refers to.

Generally, upon being notified of such an issue occurring, the team would take swift action to book in the revisit, and also contact the specific business to discuss the reasons for the issue. Should any delay be due to the Council, we would of course apologise for the length of time taken to respond. Additionally, when the Service Manager becomes aware they would review the details of the particular case, and seek to identify why any error had occurred. The team would then review the process and undertake any changes required with the aim of minimising the chances of this issue happening again.

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3. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Barker, Cabinet member for finance and property assets

The February 2023 decision on the height of the new offices indicated that a final decision on whether or not to build the offices would be subject to a full financial review. Can you give any update on the current viability or business plan for the proposed four storey plan as one of the reasons we were previously told it needed to be five was the viability of the scheme?

Response

Thank you for your question. As you say, the February 2023 decision on the height of the building did indicate that a final decision on whether or not to build the offices would be subject to a full financial review. The original proposal for the five-storey building was based on the council occupying three floors (the ground floor, first and second) with the third and fourth floors being let commercially. It is now apparent that the council only expects to need to accommodate around 100 usable desks on any one day, with the remaining space being used for collaboration, rather than an indicative higher number of desks previously assumed before detailed work had been finalised. This number of staff can be accommodated on the ground and first floors, leaving the top two floors for commercial let. The commercial space therefore remains at two floors and so viability has not been negatively impacted by the height reduction.