

Questions and Answers

Council
Thursday 18 July 2024

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Member Questions as specified in the Council's Procedure Rules of the Constitution

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Question (A)	Council Meeting on 18 July 2024
Relevant Officer(s):	Shannon Coleman-Slaughter

(A) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Councillor Howard Woollaston:

"I asked at the last Executive why the Council borrowed £25 million from the PWLB With inflation down to 2% and the indication of three ¼% cuts in Bank interest rates in the rest of 2024 what was the need to borrow so much at what is likely to be the highest PWLB borrowing rates , albeit thankfully for only 18 months- it is still costing millions at a time of council budget stresses. The Portfolio Holder was not present, and I received what can only be described as a non – answer which did not address what the money has been spent on. Nor did I Receive a response to my supplementary which this question repeats.

For an administration which supposedly prides itself on transparency I am appalled. Please answer the question what has this vast amount of money, costing millions in interest, been spent on?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

I'd like to apologize that your previous question and follow up question wasn't answered, and you didn't receive a response so I've actually asked for an investigation why that did not occur, so you have my personal word that we'll find out what happened to the follow-up.

During 2023/24 the Council externalised financing of its capital financing requirement (CFR), as internal working capital (Balance Sheet resources) were depleted. In accordance with the Council's borrowing strategy, which focuses on borrowing short term, the Council focused on borrowing short term via local authority markets. When availability of the local authority markets was constrained, the Council sought to remove risk of unavailability of funds through usage of PWLB. At the time that PWLB financing was obtained at an average of 5.4%, the local authority market rates were on average 6-7%, reflecting a restriction of available funds within the sector. The financing obtained continues to support financing of the CFR. Local authority borrowing rates on average are currently 5.1 - 5.2% for 1 – 3-month periods.

In summary, at the time of undertaking financing from the PWLB, the availability of local authority short term financing was constrained with average lending rates of 6 - 7%. To mitigate the risk of a lack of funding and avoid additional bank charges, £25 million in £5 million tranches, covering periods of 12 to 18 months at approximately 5.4% was undertaken, this compares to current average local authority lending rates

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of 5.1 - 5.2%. The Council's current weighted average cost of borrowing is 3.6%, once longer-term borrowing rates fall and are comparable with the current weighted average the Council will step back to longer term borrowing.

The Chairman asked: *"Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?"*

Councillor Howard Woollaston asked the following supplementary question:

"The answer you have given is obviously very sensible in terms of money rates but what you haven't answered is what have you spent the 25 million pounds on?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

So you have the difference between accrual accounting and cash accounting so a good illustration. We talked about earlier the deferred payments for social care. So currently we have to fund out of our own cash resources residents who are utilizing our care homes and have a deferred payment so we have to we start billing and we have to incur that cost and that's the type of thing which we're having to borrow money for to fund short term cash requirements when we can give you a fuller detail of all of the examples of why we're having to borrow cash flow on short-term borrowing rates.

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Question (B)	Council Meeting on 18 July 2024
Relevant Officer(s):	Bob Dray

(B) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

“Members are increasingly frustrated by the poor performance of WBC’s Planning Department in respect of enforcement issues. In Aldermaston Ward, which I represent, there are several active enforcement cases about which residents and parish councils are very concerned, yet it is near impossible to obtain updates on these cases even after escalation to the highest level.

What action will the lead member take to improve significantly the performance of this important service?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing undertook to provide a response in writing subsequent to the meeting:

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Question (C)	Council Meeting on 18 July 2024
Relevant Officer(s):	Laura Callan

(C) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Chris Read:

“For each of all the options described in the Statement of Common Ground of the Local Plan, at which stage(s) would elected Members of the Council be asked to formally (i.e. in a meeting open to the public) consider and/or approve the emerging plans for a North East Thatcham development?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The statement of common ground set out 3 potential options that could be pursued to develop a masterplan for the North East Thatcham allocation. The three options were put forward at the request of the Inspector and the Council has made it clear that the preferred option is for the production of a masterplan to be commissioned and led by the Council so that it can secure appropriate engagement and consultation and be approved by full Council, prior to submission of a planning application. The proposed policy has been drafted accordingly to achieve this. It is envisaged that the precise nature of this engagement and consultation would be developed in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing at that time and specified in the project brief for production of the masterplan.

The Chairman asked: *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

Councillor Chris Read asked the following supplementary question:

“I believe there is an option for supplementary planning documents to also be part of the master plan submission and just wondered if that is being considered by the Council as well?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

That is a third option on that Statement of Common Ground. I think we are looking at the moment at a masterplan rather than actually an SPD.

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Question (D)	Council Meeting on 18 July 2024
Relevant Officer(s):	Laura Callan

(D) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Councillor Chris Read:

“In his Action Point 15, the Inspector for the Local Plan examination asked the Council to consider whether the agreed masterplan for a North East Thatcham development should be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). If the draft Local Plan presented to Full Council for adoption does not specify the adoption of an SPD, does national planning legislation and guidance and the Council's Constitution allow the elected Members to amend the Local Plan to specify the adoption of an SPD for the North East Thatcham development?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The Inspector has details of 3 potential options that could be followed to develop a masterplan for North-East Thatcham, one of which is through development of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). An SPD is a useful way to provide more detailed advice or guidance on policies in an adopted local plan, but it does not form part of the development plan and cannot introduce new planning policies. As such, whether the masterplan is adopted as an SPD or not, will not make a significant difference. What matters is the quality of the master planning process, and the Council has worded the policy to secure the development of a masterplan, led by the Council will full engagement and consultation. The Inspector will be considering the merits or otherwise of the 3 options put forward and will indicate whether a Supplementary Planning Document is necessary to secure these aims and will advise the Council accordingly.

The Chairman asked: *“Do you have a supplementary question arising directly out of the answer to your original question. A supplementary should be relevant to the original question and not introduce any new material?”*

Councillor Chris Read asked the following supplementary question:

“I wonder if the Council has a definition of what consultation is and if that could include members and the community?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

It's a full consultation so that will certainly include Members because it's going to come to full Council.
