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

Question (A)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Gabrielle Mancini

(A) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation by Councillor Boeck:

“Does the Portfolio Holder believe that the Council has the capabilities (both sponsorship and delivery) to achieve the successful outcomes required from the transformation projects?”

The Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation provided the following written response:

Yes. The transformation programme is led by a Service Director who was appointed on a two-year fixed term basis following a member-led recruitment process in April 2023 and who will act as project sponsor for the projects it contains.

It is anticipated that the vast majority of the work contained within the programme's projects will be carried out from within existing resources as the Council has in-house specialists in project management, property, legal, HR and other relevant disciplines as well as subject matter experts in the service areas falling within the scope of the programme.

Where there is a business case for additional investment in order to realise the benefits of the programme, this will be considered on its merits by senior officers and members of the Executive.

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Question (B)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	April Peberdy

(B) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Leader of Council; Executive Portfolio Holder Strategy, Communications and Public Safety by Councillor Dick:

“Can the Leader explain why he told the Chairman of Newbury Rugby Club that the Sports Hub is not going ahead when no decision has been made by the Executive?”

The Leader of Council; Executive Portfolio Holder Strategy, Communications and Public Safety provided the following written response:

I told them that subject to the Executive decision, following my recommendation, we would not be progressing it.



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Question (C)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Sarah Clarke

(C) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Leader of Council; Executive Portfolio Holder Strategy, Communications and Public Safety by Councillor Mackinnon:

“Does the Leader believe that the language and tone used by Cllr Chris Read in his letter published in the Newbury Weekly News on 21 September are appropriate for use when responding to a member of the public?”

The Leader of Council; Executive Portfolio Holder Strategy, Communications and Public Safety provided the following written response:

Thank you for the question.

As you are aware, all Members are required to adhere to the Council's Code of Conduct, which is based on the principles of public life including leadership and accountability, and the Councillor's Code of Conduct requires that Members treat others with courtesy and respect. I am confident that all Members will be mindful of their duties in this regard when acting in their capacity as Members of this Council.

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Question (D)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Kofi Adu-Gyamfi

(D) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity by Councillor Kander:

“The Liberal Democrat manifesto promised to remove the Garden Waste charge – can the portfolio holder confirm that the administration will keep that promise, and when?”

The Portfolio Holder for Climate Action, Recycling and Biodiversity provided the following written response:

The Administration remains committed to phasing out the garden waste charge. Options are being considered to determine the best way to achieve this objective, whilst managing the Council's challenging financial situation. Further details will be announced as soon as we can.

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Question (E)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	April Pederdy

(E) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Public Health, Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside by Councillor Woollaston:

“Had the ill-fated Judicial Review of the Sports Hub not occurred, when would the Sports Hub likely have been opened?”

The Portfolio Holder for Public Health, Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside provided the following written response:

Whilst the initial target date for completion, identified at the start of the project, was March 2022, planning permission was only granted on 16 March 2022. The expected duration of the project was 32 weeks, plus 14 weeks lead in for utilities. So the anticipated completion date could have been in February 2023.



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Question (F)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Paul Coe

(F) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health Integration by Councillor Stewart:

“What effect has the recruitment and retention initiative had on Social Work staff numbers?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health Integration provided the following written answer:

There has been a significant review of the Recruitment and Retention package for Social Workers within Children and Family Services. We haven't at this time done the same within Adult Social Care for a variety of reasons. We have, for example, undertaken some targeted work on improving the staffing position in our care homes – with very positive effects – as this was more pressing.

The challenge in Adult Social Care is not as pronounced as in Children and Family Services when it comes to Social Work posts and we have a range of existing measures in train, such as the 'grow your own' work. This has led to some positive impacts and we have recently seen two Social Work graduates and one Occupational Therapy graduate.

Also, in the last 6 months there have been 20 new starters in our care homes and another four are due to start before early November. Another three positions have been offered. Most of these were previously agency staff. Six new casual staff have also been registered.

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Question (G)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Eric Owens

(G) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement by Councillor Bennyworth:

“Could the Portfolio Holder please advise how the Liberal Democrat’s manifesto pledge to re-introduce neighbourhood notifications for planning applications is progressing?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement provided the following written response:

Thank-you for your question. The manifesto pledge to re-introduce neighbour notification letters is progressing well and in fact we intend to start sending them out this week as part of a pilot project. As an interim measure, we are using an in-house team to do this but we expect to move to an automated system in the very near future once the digital links are set up.

The parameters are as follows:

Major applications – 50-meter buffer around the plotted red line.

Minor applications including Householder – immediate neighbours to the side, front and rear. If there is a highway in between the proposal and neighbours, then this will be included.

Other applications – as above.

We will only notify neighbours on the submission of the initial application. We will not write to them with any amendments, or when the decision is made under delegated powers.

Forecast Cost

It is estimated that the in-year cost to Planning Services is between £8 - £10k (including the interim process). This is only an estimate as if the authority receives more major applications, then we will be sending out more letters.

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It is estimated that over a 12-month period using the automated service approach that between 20,000 and 24,000 letters will be sent out on planning applications, with a total cost of circa £11.5k.



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Question (H)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Michelle Sancho

(H) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People's Services by Councillor Boeck:

"What plans does the Portfolio Holder have to reduce spending on taking children to school?"

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People's Services provided the following written response:

The Home to School Transport budget has been under invested in for a number of years: The cost for 2021/22 was £3.2m, in 2022/23 it was £3.6m and for this financial year in spite of the predicted rise in both numbers of pupils entitled to transport, and an increase in those pupils with EHCPs the previous administration budgeted for only £3.5m – clearly an insufficient with the additional cost of living rise.

There is an ongoing review to look at how best to deliver the service to meet the needs of children and young people.

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Question (I)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Joseph Holmes

(I) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Services by Councillor Mackinnon:

“When you promised at the Budget meeting in March that you would present an emergency budget if the Liberal Democrats were elected, had you consulted with officers regarding that promise?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Services provided the following written repose:

We said we would commence an emergency budget, however context was always going to be “dependant” on what we inherited on taking office on May 25th. What we discovered is certainly a financial emergency, at Q1 a projected year end net deficit. The triage required to get our year end finances to balance is requiring significant hard work by officers and members to do so via the Financial Review Panel. Our ability to balance the books is not helped by the relative low level of reserves we have inherited by the previous administration. As well a somewhat optimistic budget set below the inflation levels continue to stay high throughout 2023.



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Question (J)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Paul Coe

(J) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health Integration by Councillor Stewart:

“The Liberal Democrat manifesto promised to ensure care packages are in place as early as possible through earlier initial care assessments. Can the portfolio holder advise what progress has been made with this promise?”

The Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health Integration provided the following written answer:

Firstly, I would like to reassure people that all contacts with the Adult Social Care teams are triaged, so that we respond most quickly to those whose needs are most urgent.

At present, the waiting times are holding steady. Unfortunately, we are needing to take the current financial position and growth in demand into account when considering the pace at which we make changes.

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Question (K)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Eric Owens

(K) Question related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement by Councillor Mackinnon:

“The Council Strategy makes only a single mention of the Local Plan, that it will be amended to ensure new housing developments come with suitable infrastructure and enhances amenities. Can the portfolio holder explain his current view on the proposed number of homes for the North East Thatcham strategic site, and whether his view has changed since the election?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement provided the following written response:

Thank you for that Question Cllr Mackinnon. I drafted the Lib Dem response to the Reg 19 Local Plan Review but it was approved by the whole of our Group and signed off by the current Leader of Council. As regards the North East Thatcham site, there were and still are some very competent Lib Dem town councillors who worked up Thatcham Town Council's response, as well as District Ward Members for Thatcham who know their town and their constituents' priorities better than I do. You can read all responses relating to the site on the website.

Our response took on board those views. You ask specifically about my personal view now and whether it has changed since then. My answer is: not a lot.

I still believe that we can and should have more new homes within the settlement areas of Newbury & Thatcham, that the windfall allowance is unrealistically modest, and that consequently we can persuade the Inspector that fewer homes are needed on North East Thatcham site than you and your colleagues imposed on it. We also want to see more infrastructure gained through this development for the town, in or near the town centre. And it isn't just Thatcham that is unhappy with this site. So is Bucklebury.

But because you rushed through the Reg 19 submission, we have to be realistic and conscious of all the many risks that face us whatever course of action we may take before and/or during an Examination. We have several options. None of them are risk or cost free. We will need to decide which one to take before too long.

The Examination by the Inspector has technically started but oral hearings don't start until "early next year". Even if we hadn't taken control from you in May, we know now that the Inspector found many aspects of your Reg 19 draft that required extensive clarification and justification, so the delay from September was almost certainly necessary even if officers had been working for you and not us. The answers to those questions – all 77 of them – were published on the Inspector's website on 2nd October and PAG has seen most of them already.

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We are working towards making as many changes to the Reg 19 Plan as we can without having to withdraw and start again, which is the last thing I personally wish to do. But we have not ruled that option out.



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Question (L)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Gabrielle Mancini

(L) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation by Councillor Boeck:

“Does the Portfolio Holder consider that it would be useful to obtain independent assurance of the transformation programme”

The Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation provided the following written answer:

Yes, and this has already been sought at both officer and member level through contacts within the Local Government Association.



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Question (M)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Paul Coe

(M) Question related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People's Services by Councillor Mackinnon:

"Why does the Council Strategy state that the Council will endeavour to retain all current Local Authority maintained schools within the Local Authority, rather than becoming Academies?"

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Young People's Services provided the following written answer:

In January 2022 research conducted on behalf of the Local Government Association found 92% of local authority maintained schools were ranked outstanding or good by Ofsted, compared with 85% of academies that have been graded since they converted.

It also found only 45% of academies that were already an academy in August 2018 managed to improve standards from inadequate or requires improvement to good or outstanding, compared with 56% of council-maintained schools.

Although we have a good working relationship with our local academies, if this council is to be properly accountable for education for all of our young people and ensure we continue to drive up standards, this administration feels we are better placed to do this if schools are within the local authority family rather than at arms length within an academy of which we have no formal oversight.

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Question (N)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Eric Owens

(N) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement by Councillor Boeck:

“How is the Portfolio Holder going to address the shortage of staff in the Planning service?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning & Community Engagement provided the following written response:

Thank-you for your question. We have a number of vacancies within the Planning Service at present, owing partly to a national shortage of professional planners and partly to the Council's own budget challenges which has made it necessary to freeze recruitment to non-business-critical posts. However, we are delighted to welcome two new officers into the Conservation and Developer Contributions teams this week and we are actively recruiting a permanent Development Manager, a Planning Policy Team Leader and a Principal Ecologist. Earlier this year, we welcomed two new graduates into the Development Management team and our recent procurement of a supplier of Level 7 Apprenticeships means we are able to offer development opportunities to existing staff to qualify as RTP1 accredited planners.

Finally, last month we submitted a bid to the Government's Planning Skills Delivery Fund for £90,000 to buy in additional support to clear the current backlog of planning applications - we hope to have some further good news on this later this month. In the meantime, we're making sure that all applications that come in are validated as quickly as possible and consultation initiated, even if we can't immediately allocate them to a case officer.

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Question (O)	Meeting on 05 October 2023
Relevant Officer(s):	Gabrielle Mancini

(O) Question not related to an item of business submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation by Councillor Boeck:

“Will the current cost constraints increase the risk to delivery of a set of successful outcomes from the transformation programme beyond the council's risk appetite?”

The Portfolio Holder for Governance and Transformation provided the following written response:

The Council balances the risks and benefits within each project before taking decisions. It does so through the use of robust governance arrangements and transparent risk management through project-based and corporate risk registers. As indicated in the answer to one of my previous questions, where there is a business case for additional investment in order to realise the benefits of the programme, this will be considered on its merits by senior officers and members of the Executive and the cost benefit ratio in respect of finance, customer experience and risk will be carefully examined through this process.

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