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

Item (A)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(A) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation by Rachel Gibbs:

“Will pooling the resources/finances of both Boroughs lead to better decision-making?”

The Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation answered:

The financial case for Local Government Reorganisation was outlined in detail within our joint submission to Government. We believe- and the business case suggests- that pooling resources and finances between the constituent local authorities of Ridgeway and Oxford & Shires councils offers a real opportunity to strengthen our decision-making and financial sustainability. Shared budgets will likely reduce duplication, help to realise contractual savings, unlock economies of scale, and allow investment in services that no extant authority could fund alone. It also creates a platform for more strategic planning across a wider geographical area, aligning priorities and tackling challenges collectively rather than in isolation. However, success will depend on clear governance and strong engagement with local communities to ensure decisions remain transparent and reflect local needs. We will look to develop these safeguards further if the Government favours our proposal following public consultation next year.

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Item (B)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(B) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Lee Allen:

“Is it true that the council is bringing in outside consultants to assess the council’s care packages budget and if so much did the council pay/is projected to pay for them?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

We have not at this time arranged for outside consultants to review our care packages budget. We need to be open to learning from experts and keeping our work appropriately under review. This may include the use of external consultants in due course.

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

Item (C)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(C) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Richard Garvie:

"The Council recently achieved a rather generous headline in the local media: "Council asks public for help saving money"? In this instance, however, the headline is rather misleading with the public only allowed to comment on two cost savings worth £63,000 or just 0.92% of the cost savings needed. Where are the other 99.2% of cost savings coming from and will the public be consulted on those proposed savings when announced?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

Thank you for your question, Mr Garvie.

The balance of the savings requirement for the 2026/27 budget is being worked through by the Council at present. The nature of the savings proposals do not require public consultation as we are not planning to cut frontline services.

The Portfolio Holder 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?"*

Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

"Can you clarify where the bulk of the proposed savings or what department the bulk of the proposed savings will come from?"

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

Not at this stage as the Chair has previously indicated, we are currently running through this and it would be premature before we have actually presented the savings to budget setting Council which will be next February.

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Item (D)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(D) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways by John Gotelee:

“Are shops/restaurants that spread out onto the pavement charged extra business rates, or do they get free rent of the pavement? Who is responsible insurance-wise if someone had an accident on the pavement but in the confines of the restaurant furniture?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Highways answered:

Mr Gotelee, thank you for your question.

All businesses that set up chairs and tables outside their premises on the public highway are required to have a Table and Chairs licence that is issued by the Traffic & Road Safety Team. A fee is payable for this licence.

As part of the licence application the business is required to show that it has the appropriate third-party insurance cover for placing tables and chairs outside their premises.

A licence will not be approved for issue without insurance being in place. The business is responsible for any claims resulting from injury caused by their equipment placed on the highway.

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Item (E)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(E) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Paul Morgan:

“The requirement for EFS is increasing; £13M in 2024/25; £15M (up from £3M) in 2024/25; and £27M in 25-26, which is / will be reflected in the need for additional and increasing borrowing. Based on the current financial situation it looks like the loan requirements will exceed £70 million in this FY. What is the current forecast for the total loans required in this FY and what is the expected end of year reserve position of the Council?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

The 2026/27 and longer term Medium Term Financial Strategy are under review and planned figures will be published in the new year as part of the annual budget setting process. The Council, like councils across the country are assessing the full impact of the Local Government Finance Settlement issued yesterday against assumed figures, currently known from our perspective in Berkshire as the Unfair Funding Formula. Our initial assessment in West Berkshire is that we will be one of the most negatively impacted councils in the country and effects of years of austerity measures from central government continues to compound the difficult decisions which we'll have to make in forthcoming years.

However, I want to reassure residents we will not be the government's austerity agent and we will ensure our residents continue to receive the services which they rely on, those frontline services. The figures provided within the Financial Improvement Plan are indicative and predate the finance settlement which was announced yesterday.

In respect of the reserves position, the Council obtained Exceptional Financial Support to bolster the reserve position and support delivery of the 2025/26 budget and absorb any potential overspends incurred in year. The forecast reserve position forms part of the quarterly reporting process and will be reforecast after the close of quarter three (December) and communicated accordingly. The quarterly position will further inform the anticipated total borrowing requirement for 2025/26. Current data does not support borrowing exceeding £70million in 2025/26.

The Portfolio Holder 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?”*

Paul Morgan asked the following supplementary question:

“I think you said Councillor Cottingham that you will not exceed £70 million in this financial year borrowing, Is that correct?”

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The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

With the current information we have, that is correct.

Paul Morgan asked the following supplementary question:

So, I understand that you are currently looking at the budget, so I won't push you any further in terms of providing any other response that I had hoped that you would provide me with, as I understand why you are not able to do that.

My supplementary question is, 'is it not inevitable that MHCLG will insist on in depth review of your finances before any further EFS is provided to the council?'

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

Thank you, Mr Morgan for your supplementary. I can confirm that part of this financial resilience process has been performed on our finances. We are in constant negotiation and contact with central government. They are well aware of the challenges which we face, and the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer are in almost weekly conversations.

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Item (F)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(F) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Rachel Gibbs:

“Bond House (the Bayer Building). How many flats are going in there? The prices allegedly range from £850 PCM to £1250 for a 1 bedroom flat! Are there council flats going in there too?”

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

Bond House is being converted from offices to 191 residential apartments under national permitted development rights set by Government. Where permitted development rights are in place, there is no need to apply to the local planning authority for planning permission to carry out that work.

There is a requirement to apply to the Local Planning Authority for prior approval in some cases about specified elements of the development. The matters that can be addressed are elements such as the highway impact, contamination risks, flood risks and noise. However, a local planning authority cannot consider any other matters and as a result, it could not require affordable housing through the proposal.

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Item (G)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(G) Question submitted to the Leader of the Council by Richard Garvie:

"When people ask questions of this Council, I believe many do so to question the political administration. Because of this, all questions asked would be determined to be of a political nature. Why is this administration allowed to pick or choose what questions to allow based on whether they deem the questions to be "political" or not and can they set out the criteria as to how questions are deemed to be political or not and whether each question is accepted or rejected?"

The Leader of the Council answered:

Let's look at the question in a little more detail. 'When people ask questions, I believe many do so to question the political administration'. Absolutely right. That's what we're here for and that's what I said earlier. Bring on your questions. 'Because of this, all questions asked would be determined to be of a political nature'. Fair enough. OK, perhaps they are. Perhaps they are a resident asking something about a road. I'm not sure how political that is, but so they are not all of a political nature, but quite a few are.

'Why is this administration allowed to pick or choose what questions to allow based on whether they deem the question to be political or not?' No, quite wrong. Quite wrong. You've asked a question here. It's not about them being political, it's about statements that are made in the preamble to the question which are personal opinions. This is not a free hit like a Facebook social media entry that says 'I believe this...'.

That is why we have worked with you, Mr Garvie. I have done it with you on e-mail directly over the last two weeks, and you have adapted your questions and most of them passed that test. So I am not sure how this can be perceived as us picking or choosing.

We are choosing not to allow people to come in and make statements that can not be substantiated, which is their own personal view.

I hope that is helpful, and I do recommend that you look at the Constitution because it's very clear on this. We may reject a question if it is not about a matter over which the body to which it has been put has responsibility; if it contains an excessive element of statement beyond the scope of the question; or if it is defamatory, frivolous, abusive, or argumentative.

I think there is plenty of scope there for you to be able to be within those parameters and still ask a question. Has that addressed your question, Mr Garvie?

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The Portfolio Holder 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?"*

Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

"You won't be surprised if I say no. The reason my questions were rejected is because I specifically, for this meeting, inserted the words Lib Dem administration into all my questions. Because every time I ask a question, I get messages from employees of the Council who are concerned about Councillors saying that I am attacking the staff. I am not attacking the staff when I ask."

The Leader of the Council responded:

Mr Garvie, I really try to give you latitude. I don't want to hear about how staff message you. It's not because you said Lib Dem administration, absolutely not. You know what you had to change to get your questions accepted. So, we have accepted your questions and we are answering them this evening. I am not really going to allow a debate or a discussion about how staff are contacting you. That is up to them. They are individuals

Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

If you let me ask my supplementary, I promise it is nothing to do with that. I was just simply mentioning why I had used the word Lib Dem administration in all my questions for this meeting.

My supplementary is that in one of the responses from the officers, I was told that something in the Local Government Act meant that I can't ask a question that could impact the support of a political party. In last almost three years that you've been running the council, there have been various questions that were asked that could potentially damage the Green Party or the Conservative Party. So, my question is again, going back to the original question, who decides? As in, is it the Lib Dems that decide what questions could be answered or officers?

The Leader of the Council answered:

You're asking who decides? I'm telling you; officers will decide against the parameters that I have given. I am being advised also that under the Local Government Act you cannot ask a question that is derogatory. Nikki, would you like to give some clarity here please?

Nicola Thomas, Service Lead - Legal & Democratic commented:

Thank you, Leader. Unfortunately, a local authority cannot publish anything that may be perceived as supporting a political party or be to their detriment. We are not allowed to publish that and we are not allowed to do anything in support. So that would prohibit us publishing any question that may mention a political party and potentially either demonstrate support or otherwise.

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The Leader of the Council answered:

So, for the avoidance of doubt, Mr Garvie, I am not picking or choosing questions. I am asking them to be made in a respectful way. Mr Garvie, you bring on your questions. Democratic Services will decide if it is at all critical or making political statements, as I have described. You bring on your questions. Be respectful. I am trying to be extremely respectful to you. I am engaging with you outside of this chamber and I have done that ever since we came to power. If you are respectful to us, we will be respectful to you, I promise. We will answer your questions, I promise. And we will move on hopefully with respect on both sides

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Item (H)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(H) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside by John Gotelee:

"The "Legal" section of the sports hub task group says Recommendation 25 outlines that the Council should refer itself to the LGSCO. This would be highly irregular. If there is a suggestion of any proposal or decision of the Council has given rise to or is likely to or would give rise to any illegality, maladministration or breach of statutory code, the Monitoring Officer is under a duty to prepare a report to Council under Sections 5 and 5A of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 (LGA 89). Would this action be irregular if high ranking officers were implicated in misleading the public or the executive?"

The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside answered:

There is no evidence to support the suggestion that high-ranking officers have misled the public or the Executive in connection to this report.

The Portfolio Holder 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?"*

John Gotelee asked the following supplementary question:

"The Scrutiny Committee believed that there was evidence and all I am saying is there a flaw in the Constitution that where somebody perhaps very high up or even has the job of sorting this out is implicated. Therefore, shouldn't it go further? A bit like the police when they stuff up something, it goes up higher".

Sarah Clarke, the Monitoring Office commented:

I am not the author of the report that is presented to Executive tonight, but I am aware that the Task and Finish group had a number of conclusions and that was presented to the Scrutiny Committee. I believe that the Scrutiny Committee rejected the suggestion by the Task and Finish group.

It is incorrect to say that the Scrutiny Committee had made those recommendations. Furthermore, the purpose of scrutiny is to undertake reviews of work that the Council has done or is proposing to do, to make recommendations to Executive and the process is that it is for the Executive to determine whether to accept any of those recommendations. So, the Executive is the decision-making body.

The Leader of the Council commented:

Mr Gotelee, do you want to rephrase your supplementary question?

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John Gotelee asked the following supplementary question:

Well, it is slightly difficult because I have not got the report in front of me, but I think that if there is anything misleading that has gone on at a high level, there should be a procedure above that. I think it would just save people in effect.

The Leader of the Council commented:

I think Councillor Culver may have referred her own report, as she wrote the initial report to the Ombudsman. We will see if that has happened and what he, or she says.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside answered:

It is important to note that under the legal and professional obligations of the Monitoring Officer, any instance of maladministration must be reported and addressed, regardless of the individuals involved. This duty applies consistently to ensure transparency and accountability.

Sarah Clarke, the Monitoring Officer commented:

I am aware that this matter has also been referred to the Ombudsman by a member of the public and the Ombudsman has refused to investigate the matter on the basis that this has been adjudicated upon in the High Court. So, I think that is a matter now of public record.

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Item (I)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(I) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Paul Morgan:

“Extracts from the CIPFA report states that the capital programme is too large, lacks focus and is not affordable. It also states that roles and responsibilities between Members and officers are blurred which contributes to a lack of focus and undermines accountability. How will the Council respond to this? What if any Capital projects will be either cancelled or postponed?”

The Leader of the Council answered:

The CIPFA report does state that roles and responsibilities between Members and officers are blurred, which contributes to a lack of focus and undermines accountability. I totally, 100% reject it. We are sent here to work with officers to get the best services for our residents and where we are subject matter experts, we bring that expertise here.

Councillors have expertise, huge amounts of expertise. I brought recruitment and staffing skills expertise here and I used it to bear down on our freelance population, which is saving us up to £5 million a year. Should I have withheld that and said I can't get involved in operational matters like that? That is a complete and utter fallacy.

I respect the officers from CIPFA, but I said that to them when they presented the report to us. There clearly is a line between Councillors and officers, but it's symbiotic. We assist where we can, we bring operational excellence where we can. We suggest changes where we can.

Where there are statutory duties, they are quite entitled and legal obligations to reject some things we suggest and recommend. But where they make sense, I expect them to use them.

We have people across the chamber with real skills, and I'm looking at you Councillor Abbs, you have terrific skills in environment and in IT. Why would we not use those? We'd be foolish not to and therefore I do reject that entirely. But I obviously appreciate what CIPFA was saying.

There are councils up and down the country where Members get involved in writing letters to residents who are so much in the weeds it is beyond what is realistic. But I refute that and you can tell that it's got under my skin a bit because if you have got expertise around you use it. Councillor Cottingham will talk about his experiences in finance and risk management. There is terrific experience across this chamber that we want to use and I know the Chief Executive wants to use them. The Chief Executive does not want us to come in one day and sit in planning and tell them how to do their job, and I get that. But where we can make suggestions and recommendations, they should be welcomed for the benefit of our residents.

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The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

Earlier today we had the Financial Review Panel looking at Adult Social Care. We were there as a critical friend to analyse variances, improvements, how we can get the budget back on track and it was a very much a team effort.

It would be remiss of the organisation not to utilise the resources of Members. It would be a derogation of duty.

Building upon early discussion, we will see later on within the Financial Improvement Plan, the Council is establishing additional forums to assist the oversight of all spend, including the capital spend. We now have additional forums that cover the capital spend, capital assets group, spend panel, financial improvement group.

From a capital programme perspective, the decisions relating to whether projects proceed, are cancelled or postponed has and always remains with Members. You will probably appreciate the fact that at this stage, it is too early for us to be able to say which ones are going to be continued, postponed, or rolled over until we formalise the 2026/27 budget. It's always an ongoing process to look at what we can deliver with the resources and typically we've always had a rolling programme.

The Portfolio Holder 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?"*

Paul Morgan asked the following supplementary question:

"I agree with your points about Members and officers, Councillor Brooks. I would also suggest that there are lots of members of the public who can provide lots of very useful advice and guidance, and I would urge the Council to actually take advantage of that. I think that would be very useful, especially in the financial situation the Council now find itself.

I have mentioned before the solar farm at Grazeley a couple of times. I have also mentioned a topic for scrutiny which talks about the lack of reports and transparency about some of the big projects that are going through. Having said that, it must be inevitable surely that some of these programmes, especially as lots of money on the capital is now being replaced and paid back to existing loans, is it inevitable that you have to start looking at some of these projects and saying, is it affordable?

The Leader of the Council answered:

We didn't say we wouldn't be. Councillor Cottingham said we would be and you would see what that comes out to in the budget papers when they come out early next year. We are not going to go through a discussion about that this evening.

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Item (J)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(J) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing by Rachel Gibbs:

"Re. Prospective Social Tenants - how does the Bidding system work now? Is it fair to single people?"

The Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing answered:

The Council adopted the revised Housing Allocations Policy in April 2021. Properties are advertised on a weekly cycle and applicants who have been accepted onto the housing register following this application process have an opportunity to lodge bids through the Choice Based Lettings Scheme. Applicants can register an interest in any property that is advertised in a given weeks cycle that they wish to express an interest in.

The final allocation of any tenancy is subject to assessment of these bids and is the decision of the Registered Provider as landlord for that property. The process does not differentiate between families or singles and is proven to be a fair way for allocating homes in the District.

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Item (K)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(K) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources by Richard Garvie:

“Councillor Cottingham stated in reply to one of my recent questions that it's "not possible" to deliver "all proposed savings" / policies in a budget. Do you think successful companies or organisations set policy or financial planning by throwing mud at the wall and hoping something sticks?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

Thank you once again Mr Garvie for your question, which confirms our diversified approach to delivering budgetary savings. A bit of a theme from my own professional experience, I project managed a three-year £100 million target cost assurance programme when I was at France Telecom Orange, which did deliver over £120 million of savings across its international footprint. I had a portfolio of saving ideas. The key to success was to back the winners and not to waste resources on unachievable projects when circumstances outside of our control changed. Hence my previous statement, 'it's not always possible to deliver all proposed savings'.

The Portfolio Holder 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?”*

Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

“Surely the proposals and potential savings are analysed on an ongoing basis? This isn't a forecast; this is the budget. That's what you expect to achieve. Or certainly in every multibillion, multi trillion dollar company I've ever worked in like Tesco, Asda, Morrison's and even running my own multimillion dollar revenue business. My supplementary question is, surely a budget is what you expect, not a forecast, which is what you hope?”

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources answered:

I spent quite a long time working in budgetary control. The budget is the representation of what you know at that particular time. A good illustration is what happened to NRS. We had it in the budget as a saving, but it went bust six months later before we were able to deliver a saving. So that saving went.

So, there are circumstances where you have to change your strategy because there are things which are outside of your control to be able to deliver. This is always the case and that's why you have contingencies in your plan.

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Item (L)	Executive Meeting on 18 December 2025
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(L) Question submitted to the Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services by Richard Garvie:

“The SEND spending is spiralling out of control all over the Country, and residents are fed up that SEND is being used as a constant excuse for not delivering other services. Can you tell us what the biggest cost centres are when it comes to SEND and what the Council is doing to tackle those big ticket costs?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services answered:

Yes, SEND spending is a significant challenge nationally, and West Berkshire is no exception. Residents whose children need SEN support for their children are not “fed up” – they value highly the support we give them, and I make no “excuses” for doing this. Our priority is to ensure every child gets the support they need, while using taxpayers’ money responsibly.

The biggest cost in our SEND budget are specialist placements, transport and specialist staffing and support services

We continue to work to reduce these pressures via various means, including expanding local provision, we have additional places opening at Caste School soon; and early intervention, strengthening support in mainstream schools to meet needs earlier and avoid escalation.

The Portfolio Holder 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?”*

Richard Garvie asked the following supplementary question:

“Has the Council done anything about what potential savings could be achieved in some of these areas by providing the services themselves as opposed to using private contract as a route?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children and Family Services answered:

We already do an amount of work in house wherever possible, for instance, i-college. We have education psychologists. We are working towards that on a greater footing, but it takes time to build.

The Leader of the Council commented:

But it is true to say, because you and I have discussed it with AnneMarie Dodds and with the Chief Executive, as to how much more can we provide in district.

It is more expensive if children have to go outside of district for the specialist needs they, require. It is being looked at all the time, Mr Garvie, and there are certainly savings to be made there.

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So, you hit upon something and I am not just saying 'don't worry about it, we are doing it'. We do worry about it, and we need to do more of it and I am grateful to you for that challenge.
