

COUNCIL – 15TH JANUARY 2024

ITEM 10 QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

10.1 Councillor Harper-Davies – Cabinet Meetings

Please can the leader of council explain why Cabinet meetings are so short in duration and item length? Can the Leader assure us that Cabinet take these meetings seriously and that there is full Cabinet member involvement, participation, and engagement in these meetings?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

Cabinet meetings are run efficiently and effectively, in a time ordered manner and Cabinet members are well briefed on matters and so therefore the amount of time spent on considering items is kept to a minimum which a good use of Council resources.

10.2 Councillor D. Taylor – Homelessness Prevention Grant

Can the Leader please advise how much Charnwood Borough Council received in 2022/23 for the Homelessness Prevention Grant? and provide a breakdown of how that funding was spent?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

£343,883.00 grant was received in total for 2022-2023:

- £288,892.00 homelessness prevention grant*
- £8,396.00 homelessness prevention grant domestic abuse top-up*
- £46,595.00 homelessness prevention grant exceptional winter top-up.*

This was allocated to the following:

- £151,549.22 internal staff*
- £79,072.28 emergency accommodation*
- £88,411.00 supported accommodation*
- £23,000.00 prevention advice services*
- £1,850.50 prevention advice mobile application.*

10.3 Councillor Snartt - Meeting Housing Needs

Charnwood Local Plan adopted 9th November 2015. Chapter 5 Meeting our Housing Needs states: 'Based on the projection for our population and household types our evidence suggests that we need to increase the number of 2 bedroom homes and that to do this around 30-35% of all homes delivered should be smaller two bedroom homes. Our community wants to see smaller houses and bungalows'. Policy CS 3 states: 'seeking an appropriate mix of types, tenures and sizes of homes, having regard to identified housing needs and the character of the area.'

Would the Leader/Lead member give details of the following:

1. The number of homes built by year over the last 5 years?
2. The percentage of 2 bedroom homes built by year over the last 5 years?
3. The number of bungalows built by year over the last 5 years?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

1. *The number of homes built by year over the last 5 years?*

The annual housing completions are completed at the end of each financial year and therefore the latest housing monitoring is based on completions upto the 31st March 2023. A total of 4,679 new homes were built between the 1st April 2018 and the 31st March 2023. The number of new homes (net) built for each financial year are as follows:

*2018/19: 1,117 homes
2019/20: 993 homes
2020/21: 1,116 homes
2021/22: 792 homes
2022/23: 661 homes*

2. *The percentage of 2 bedroom homes built by year over the last 5 years?*
3. *The number of bungalows built by year over the last 5 years?*

At present the Council is not required to record and monitor this data. The monitoring system will be changed for the draft local plan when it is adopted so that this type of data is picked up in future monitoring reports.

10.4 Councillor Snartt - Reporting Anti-Social Behaviour

Whilst a member of Plans Committee, I raise concerns about the low levels of reported anti-social behaviour by Charnwood Borough Council. This is in conflict with the perceived high levels outlined by residents. This was apparent at the last two meetings, where resident from the Kingfisher Estate, Loughborough gave evidence of incidents that, in my view, were far above the levels recorded by Charnwood Borough Council in their submissions to the Committee.

Accordingly, I ask the Leader:

1. What measures will he put in place to overcome these concerning circumstances that are impacting on residents' lives in areas of the Borough such as the Kingfisher Estate?
2. If residents report anti-social behaviour to partners (Police or Loughborough University) how is this reported to Charnwood Borough Council, noting this information is used when determining planning applications?
3. Would it be best practice to issue recorded levels of anti-social behaviour to Councillors by Ward in a timely manner?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

Tackling anti-social behaviour is a key priority for both Charnwood Borough Council and the Charnwood Community Safety Partnership. In 2011, Leicestershire Police, along with other local authorities, adopted the Anti-Social Behaviour Case Recording System known as Sentinel, a system that had been embedded within Charnwood Council since 2005.

Sentinel ensures that an incident of reported anti-social behaviour can be case managed in a multiagency setting. Both the police and the council have shared access and can trigger alert each agency upon the reporting of an incident of an anti-social nature. The cumulative impact of any anti-social behaviour can be risk assessed and detailed mitigation put in place by partner agencies to ensure the safety of the victim and the community.

For context, Charnwood Borough Council undertook a full corporate review of anti-social behaviour recording and case management processes during 2021/22. In April 2022, the council launched an automated process for the recording of anti-social behaviour incidents online via the council's website. This allows victims to complete an incident recording form which creates a corporate record within the council's database and within Sentinel. Leicestershire Police offer a similar recording facility via their website. If necessary, there is also the function to record an incident of anti-social behaviour via the council's or the police call management centres. The automated on-line process, however, negates the customer having to wait in a call centre queue.

Leicestershire Police and Charnwood Borough Council are both relevant authorities that have a duty to form a Community Safety Partnership, under 'sect 17 Crime & Disorder Act 1998'. Under this statutory duty, information and intelligence is shared between both partner agencies in respect of reported anti-social behaviour and this is the case for the Kingfisher Estate, Loughborough.

Planning Committee are provided with a Sentinel summary of reported anti-social behaviour incidents within a requested location. This summary contains cases recorded by the relevant authorities ie Charnwood Borough Council and Leicestershire Police.

It must be noted that Loughborough University are not a relevant authority as defined by the Crime & Disorder Act 1998 and therefore, have no duty placed upon them in respect of recording or case managing incidents of anti-social behaviour.

Furthermore, Sentinel is utilised to identify hot spot locations and a heat mapping functionality is built into the system. This data is utilised at the monthly Loughborough Central Delivery Group (LCDG) – a multi-agency meeting forming part of the Charnwood Community Safety Partnership's delivery model. This meeting takes an evidenced based approach to tackling crime and anti-social behaviour within the locality of Loughborough Town Centre and surrounding neighbourhoods. For context, the Kingfisher Estate falls into the remit of this dedicated locality-based group.

The Community Safety Partnership would be happy to provide elected members with a quarterly report of recorded anti-social behaviour. However, a point to note is that Charnwood Borough has 10 Leicestershire Police beats designated to the locality. Unfortunately, the police beats, and electoral wards are not co-terminus, hence the partnership could only provide anti-social behaviour data per the 10 police beats. An index could be provided to give elected members information as to which beats are closest to their electoral wards.

Finally, residents can report anti-social behaviour to Charnwood Borough Council via the following website: https://www.charnwood.gov.uk/pages/asb_guide

10.5 Councillor Baines – Council Reserves

You previously indicated pre-election that you would not spend reserves to balance the council budget. You are now saying you will make 'slow' use of reserves to balance the council budget. Why are you using reserves at all given you have received a windfall from council investments due to the high savings interest rates, strong commercial income, and £1.3m of income from business rates? Are you not afraid that residents might think you are mismanaging the budget?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

In my response to Councillor Baines' question to the Cabinet meeting of 14 December 2023 I noted that the approach to budget setting was set out in my paper to the Budget Scrutiny Panel of 24 October 2023.

In this paper I set out the approach which is 'to slow the use of reserves to enable a balanced budget to be achieved over the term of the council across a number of financial cycles, whilst protecting services and enabling investment in projects with significant future cost saving, income raising or service enhancement potential.

There has been no revision to this overarching approach since the Cabinet meeting of last month.

At the Cabinet meeting of 14 December the draft budget for 2024/25 was presented. It may be noted that no reduction in the key general fund working balance was a feature which was highlighted within the draft proposals.

In setting any budget it is obviously necessary to consider the prevailing financial situation and outlook. Notwithstanding that the draft budget does not envisage any reduction in the working balance, the proposals are considered consistent with the overarching approach to budget setting restated above.

10.6 Councillor Baines - General Fund budgeted expenditure

Does the leader not agree that there should be greater efficiencies made by reducing General Fund budgeted expenditure by a further 3% and/or increasing parking charges further? This would halve the intended use of reserves this year, properly slowing the use of reserves, and ensuring our residents get better value for money?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

The draft budget report presented at Cabinet on 14 December 2023 noted that a portfolio of options for change had been developed covering income generation and cost savings over a range of Council activities and envisaged that £0.4m out of the total portfolio of options could be realised in 2024/25.

Subsequently, the Cabinet report noted that options for change under consideration included a review of the Council's car parking provision.

The portfolio of options for change will be refined and developed on an ongoing basis with savings included within annual budgets after the implications and consequences of changes are fully understood. This approach is preferred to budget setting based on arbitrary percentage savings targets.

10.7 Councillor Charles - bad debt provision, Housing Revenue Account budget

Now that inflation is at its lowest level for many months, why is it necessary for bad debt provision in the Housing Revenue Account budget to be so high, nearly three times the previous budget?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

Provision for Bad Debts & Other Charges has been increased from £118k (2022/23) to a projected £333k (2024/25) to make provision for unpaid rent, court costs, and other debts owed by current and former tenants projected to the end of 2024/25.

This is a top up to the existing brought forward bad debt provision. The provision at 1st April 23 was £1.14 million which provided for the whole of the debt owed to the HRA. The debt when the 2024/25 draft budget was set (mid-October 2023) was £1.4 million and this figure was used to project the potential bad debt at the end of the financial year 2024/25 based on rent increases and other sensitivities, to arrive at the £333k top up figure for that year.

The level of rent arrears as a percentage of receivable rental income including arrears brought forward, is currently at 2.41%, its lowest level in 5 years.

Arrears- 19/20	Arrears- 20/21	Arrears- 21/22	Arrears- 22/23	Arrears- 23/24
2.83%	3.33%	3.46%	2.86%	2.41%

10.8 Councillor Charles - Repairs and maintenance items, Housing Revenue Account budget

Due to the financial constraints of the council, do you not agree that a more targeted and gradual approach to the repairs and maintenance items in the Housing Revenue Account budget would result in a lower spend in this year's budget, whilst achieving an acceptable standard?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

The increase in the Repairs and Maintenance budget from £7,429,000 to £8,385,000 is substantively to cover the cost of the pay award, materials (budgets in this respect have not been increased since 2019), and contract price increases, arising because of inflation, and legal costs associated with defending housing disrepair claims. The budget increase is necessary to deliver the repairs service to tenants.

The Capital programme relating to investment in the Council's existing stock has been predominantly based on the Charnwood Standard which is the current agreed policy position relating to investment in the Council's stock. Kitchens are replaced every 20 years, and bathrooms every 30 years.

10.9 Councillor Bokor - Pension investments in fossil fuels

The Labour/Green administration sent a letter to the County Council regarding pension investments in fossil fuels, which appears to have been rebuffed. We also went on to declare a climate emergency. Please could the lead member explain why there is £866,311.68 from section S106 money sitting in Charnwood's bank account waiting to be committed to biodiversity projects and which we are in danger of losing if not spent in time? Surely all members would agree that using this money quickly and proactively on a variety of projects right across the borough would have a direct benefit to our environment and therefore the health and wellbeing of our residents?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

The funds relate to payments to mitigate the loss of biodiversity from certain development sites in Charnwood in instances where the mitigation could not be accommodated on site. The vast majority of these payments are not time limited. The Council's Biodiversity Officer is working with internal and external stakeholders to coordinate the spend of these monies to realise the necessary compensation.

The Council are currently working with a number of partners to identify robust and secure biodiversity offsetting projects that meet the requirement of the relevant S106 agreements, provide value for money and where possible subsidiary benefits such as public access and flood mitigation.

The Hathern community woodland is around 7Ha new woodland with public access on Council owned land with a previous arable use. It was partly funded by HS2 and the biodiversity offsetting payment has been provided for

conservation management to secure benefits for wildlife conservation beyond the initial planting

10.10 Councillor Deborah Taylor - Bedford Square Gateway project

Can the Leader please explain why there is a line in the draft budget (agreed at Cabinet on 14th December 2023) to increase the budget for the Bedford Square Gateway project by £700k in 2024/25, due to increasing costs of completion, funded by capital receipts.

The Leader has always described this as a 'vanity project'. I am therefore confused as to why he would be planning to spend an additional £700,000 on this project and why he has changed his view on this project?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

The Bedford Square project was inherited by this administration and is virtually complete. However, the project site requires 'snagging' works to enable the ongoing adoption of the highway by Leicestershire County Council. It is essential that this adoption is enabled, hence allowing the project to be considered fully complete.

The sum of £700,000 will account for delays occasioned by utility companies during the construction contract, unforeseen works and business support together with an allowance for snagging prior to adoption by the County Council.

10.11 Councillor Bottomley - Falcon Centre

In light of the Falcon Centre having, its funding removed by Leicestershire County Council, what steps in this Council taking to facilitate a multi-agency approach to finding new funding streams to try and keep this much needed facility open?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

A range of organisations from across Leicestershire refer people to the services that operate from the Falcon Centre. The Council, with its district partners, through the Chief Housing Officers Group, collaborated to submit a response to the County Council's consultation in respect of its proposals to reduce the funding there. The Council also sent an individual response.

Falcon Support Services is an independent organisation responsible for generating its own funding, and whilst the Council is engaged in a dialogue with the service, it is not possible for the Council to secure external funding on its behalf.

The Council does currently commission Falcon Support Services to deliver housing and associated services for homeless people the Council has a statutory duty to house.

10.12 Councillor Lawrence – Flooding

In November 2023, the Council voted unanimously to declare a Climate Emergency. It is clear from the increased frequency of heavy rainfall that this emergency is happening now due to global climate change. On 2nd January 2024, many Charnwood residents experienced severe levels of flooding when local rivers and watercourses burst their banks.

Many Charnwood communities have seen the construction of new housing estates resulting in increased run-off of surface water draining into local watercourses, e.g., into Sileby Brook and Barkby Brook in Syston. The local flood defences, often in the form of concrete brook channels through built-up areas, now regularly fail to cope with the volume of water draining into them and consequently burst their banks.

The Environment Agency is responsible for maintaining and, where necessary, improving flood defences for many watercourses in the borough. In recent years, they have repeatedly failed to meet residents' and their elected representatives' expectations to keep brook channels clear of silt and vegetation.

- 1) What steps has the Council taken to establish the full extent of the impact of recent flooding episodes on Charnwood's residents and businesses?
- 2) Will the Council represent residents' legitimate concerns by lobbying the Environment Agency to:
 - a) urgently assess the effectiveness of the existing flood prevention infrastructure in Sileby, Syston and other areas badly affected by the recent floods, and
 - b) develop a plan to invest in upgrading flood defences in the light of the changing climate and additional residential developments?

The Leader or his nominee will respond:

The Council is concerned about the impacts of flooding in our area, many of our communities are vulnerable to flooding and recent events, caused by prolonged and intense rainfall, had a devastating impact on some communities. Some watercourses/ rivers in the borough reached record high levels on their gauges.

Charnwood Borough Council work extensively with Leicestershire County Council (in their capacity as LLFA for the area) and with the Environment Agency to establish the extent of flooding events in our communities. Many visits to residents have already taken place and more are planned going forwards. This will help all authorities understand the flood risks in future and assess eligibility for any government support which may be offered.

Leicestershire County Council, as the LLFA, have a Flood Risk Management Strategy (<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/flooding-and-drainage/flood-risk-management>), which they are currently reviewing.

Charnwood Borough Council is consulted on the contents of the Strategy and there are opportunities to comment on its contents. In addition, Charnwood participates in the Leicestershire Flood Risk Management Board alongside other agencies like the Environment Agency, Severn Trent Water and the Trent Rivers Trust. Under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, the LLFA (LCC) can undertake Section 19 investigations which seek to establish the cause of a particular flooding event. Details of provision investigations can be found by using the same link.

There is a requirement for new developments in Planning Policy CS16 for Sustainable Urban Drainage System (SuDS) plans which ensure that surface water run-off is no worse than the green field run off rate and where possible make a net improvement. SuDs plans are approved by the Lead Local Flood Authority (LCC).

The Scrutiny Commission has agreed to the establishment of a Flooding Scrutiny Panel. Cllr Harper-Davies has been appointed as Chair and work will progress on a Scoping Document.

The Council will continue to work with other agencies, including the Environment Agency and Leicestershire County Council to manage the flood risk in the area and advocate for any investment which might mitigate the impact of any future events.

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE TO COUNCIL – PROCEDURE

- Councillors are required to submit a question on notice in writing by 12noon on the eighth working day prior to Council, the title of the question is published on the Council Agenda.
- Questions and responses will be published at the end of the previous working day (usually the Friday prior to a Council meeting on a Monday) and will be available at the Council meeting for Councillors, the press, and the public.
- After the questions and responses are published **Councillors may indicate that they wish to ask a supplementary question by noon on the day of the Council meeting.**
- The Mayor will invite those Councillors who have indicated that they wish to do so to ask a supplementary question.
- The Leader (or relevant Lead Member on behalf of the Leader) or Chair of the Committee is able to respond.
- The total time each person can speak on a single question is time limited.