

Supplementary Papers

Council

To be held as a Virtual Meeting
on Wednesday 7 October 2020 at 7.00 pm

Open to the public including the press

20. Questions on notice - written responses pages 2-4

Written response to questions submitted in accordance with council procedure rule 33 – 7 October 2020

A. From Councillor Andy Foulsham to Councillor Andy Crawford, Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets

Could the Cabinet member outline the impact on the district council's finances of the measures to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on local residents, and of the inevitable reduction in income to the council? Could he also identify how much additional funding has been received from central Government to cover the expenditure incurred at their request?

Written answer

As shown in the revised budget report – agenda item 9 of tonight's papers – officers currently estimate a net cost to the council of over £400,000 due to COVID-19. This represents a combination of additional costs and loss of income totalling over £3.5 million. We have received over £1.5 million in government grant funding, and expect to receive over £1.7 million as compensation for lost income. In total, government funding is not expected to cover all our losses, hence the need for Council to agree to increase the revenue budget tonight. This Council's financial situation as a result of COVID-19 mirrors that of most authorities of all political hues around the country many of which are also finding themselves needing to establish an interim budget. On the income side there are 3 main categories which have impacted us. Firstly, initiatives which we have chosen to take in order to increase the safety of our residents – for example the decision to suspend car parking fees during the lockdown period. Second, the indirect results of government decisions such as the slow-down of house building during lockdown and the inevitable consequence that has had on planning fee income. Finally, direct results of government legislation to close down certain sectors of the economy such as community establishments like the Beacon which have resulted in a direct loss of income. In deciding to reimburse only just over 70% of lost income, the government have effectively required Local Authorities to finance these deficits from their own resources – ultimately the Council Tax Payer.

A further consequence of COVID-19 on our finances, and this is likely to be significant although difficult to quantify, is the impact of staff resources being diverted from their normal functions to dealing with the pandemic for our local residents. This Council had planned a series of initiatives to both increase income and reduce expenditure through 2020/21. Our staff have truly risen to the challenges which COVID-19 has created and we owe them a debt of gratitude. However, in doing so activities on transforming the financial health of this Council have been inevitably delayed and this in turn will have a negative impact on our finances and create further challenges when we come to considering the full year budget for 2021/22.

**B. From Councillor Sarah Medley to Councillor Judy Roberts,
Cabinet Member for Development and Infrastructure**

At the full Council meeting in July, we highlighted the concerns of many residents in Harwell and Didcot regarding the cycle accessibility and safety of the proposed design of the B4493 roundabout as part of the plans for the Valley Park development. We have since been raising this issue with the relevant decision-makers at all levels, including calling meetings with Vale and County Council officers and the local county councillor, and we are pleased to see that the roundabout design is now being reviewed. However, this is just one of many aspects of the Valley Park proposals which are less than optimal with regards to sustainability and active travel. Can we be assured that the Valley Park development will be built to safely accommodate and encourage cyclists, and that it will follow the garden principles that guide the development of Didcot?

Written answer

The current outline planning application is being assessed by officers in accordance with the recently adopted Local Plan 2031, in particular Core Policies; 15 (Spatial Strategy for SE Vale sub-area), 16b (Didcot Garden Town), 35 (Promoting Public Transport, Cycling and Walking), 37 (Design and Local distinctiveness) and 38 (Design Strategies for Strategic and Major development sites). These policies guide new development and so reflects the garden town principles and connecting places. In addition, officers have been liaising with and continue to liaise with the developers, OCC highways officers and the Ward Members on these matters and I am pleased to see that some reviews have taken place. The application will be considered and determined by the planning committee.

**C. From Councillor Jenny Hannaby to Councillor Judy Roberts,
Cabinet Member for Development and Infrastructure**

If the changes to the current planning system that were proposed in the government consultation of that name get adopted, what effect would that have on Vale of White Horse District Council's ability to deliver affordable housing?

Written answer

The government consultation 'Planning for the Future' suggests that: *the new [Infrastructure] Levy will raise more revenue.....and deliver at least as much – if not more – on-site affordable housing as at present (P.22)*. This is despite the proposals that suggest the removal of legal agreements to secure affordable housing in the long term for future occupiers, the temporary lifting of the small sites threshold, up to 40 or 50 units, below which developers do not need to contribute to affordable housing and that 25% of affordable housing is proposed to be First Homes (up to 30% discount off market house price to first time purchasers). Officers suggest at this early stage of the proposed planning reforms, the council is unlikely to secure similar numbers of affordable housing as it has in the past due to the absence of a legally

binding S.106 agreement as well as the raising of the small sites threshold. It is also currently unclear how the council will secure the type and quality of the affordable homes it needs. These points will be highlighted in the council's response to the government consultation.

**D. From Councillor Amos Duveen to Councillor Andy Crawford,
Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets**

Given the disturbing reporting of human rights violations in various supply chains around the world, especially (but not limited to) the forced labour camps in Xinjiang, China, where Uyghur Muslims are being detained, can Councillor Crawford please confirm that the procurement policy he is developing will have an ethical dimension so that Vale residents can be assured that in future, so far as is possible, their council tax will not be spent on the products of such gross abuses?

Written answer

I can confirm that officers are working on a procurement policy for the council and we are targeting February 2021 for Cabinet and Council consideration and adoption. I expect that the policy will adopt "responsible procurement" as one of the council's procurement core values to ensure that the impact of purchasing decisions is considered right at the beginning of the process.

I am aware that Local Authorities in the UK do not on the whole have an enviable record when it comes to the ethical dimension of their procurement policies. There are, however, some beacon authorities and in drafting our procurement policy we should be aiming to at least match their policies, whilst also drawing on the work of other organisations including, for example, Unison, Amnesty International, the Workers' Rights Consortium and Electronics Watch.

It would be easy to conclude that, as a very small purchaser in the overall scheme of things, our policies will have only a negligible impact on global outcomes. In that respect one may draw an analogy with Climate Change initiatives where the actions of many players – however small – can have a beneficial cumulative impact. I am minded also to reflect upon the apartheid regime in South Africa. It fell as a result of the cumulative effects of many upon its economy. We can choose either to acknowledge the problems created by non-ethical purchasing and seek to be part of the solution or ignore them and be part of the problem. When brought forward our procurement policy will aim to be the former and not the latter.