

Written responses to questions – 18 December 2024 Council meeting

A. Question from Councillor Katherine Foxhall to Councillor Lugova, Cabinet Member for Planning

The Housebuilder Forum's *Unspent Developer Contributions Report* for 2024 has recently identified that Oxfordshire County Council holds £287.5m of unspent Section 106 money, the largest of any authority in the country. [1] While Vale of White Horse was not mentioned in this year's report, in 2023, the HBF identified Vale of White Horse as holding £18,223,919 in unspent contributions, at the time this was the 18th highest in England among the authorities who responded to the FOI request.

Allocating funding for infrastructure is extremely complicated and the fact of any particular pot of money being "unspent" is not necessarily an issue in itself. But I would like to ask the Cabinet member how much S106 money, where all instalments have been received by Vale, remains unallocated and within one and two years of the "spend by" deadline, and have we had to return any S106 money to developers in the last 5 years?

[1]

https://www.hbf.co.uk/documents/14032/2024_Unspent_developer_contributions_report.pdf

[2]

https://www.hbf.co.uk/documents/12809/HBF_Unspent_Developer_Contributions_Report_2023.pdf

Written response

The Vale has a successful track record of putting funding secured through S106 agreements to good use with over £8.6m of contributions spent within the past 5 years on the delivery of projects to support the growth of the district, either directly or through funding provided to other local organisations.

Funding secured through S106 agreements usually comes with a period in which contributions must be used. In most cases there are 10 years to spend the contributions from the point they are received but there are some instances where the window is shortened to 7 or 5 years.

In response to the question, Vale is holding £258,664 of S106 that is due to expire within one year or less that is secured for specific purposes but is not currently committed to specific projects. A further £929,888 of contributions, also secured for specific purposes but not yet committed to specific projects, is held that will expire within one to two years. The majority of these balances, over £915,000, relate to leisure, which will be directed to support the recently approved leisure facilities and playing pitch strategies, and affordable housing, for which a council report is to be brought forward in the new year that will seek approval of S106 funding for that purpose.

In terms of prioritising the use of funds, this is done based on the identified spending criteria of the contributions and expiry dates so that we can ensure proper use of the funds and minimise the risk of expiry. In cases where the S106 is not available to Vale to spend directly, we ensure that all eligible recipients of contributions nearing expiry are notified and as far as possible, officers offer support to them to bring forward suitable projects that can benefit from the funding secured.

Vale has not been required to return any unspent S106 funding to developers. However, there are currently 9 contributions which have expired, and these total £63,225. Officers are currently in discussion with the relevant developers relating to these, so that the original S106 can be varied and the funds spent.

Finally, whilst S106 contributions can only be secured if the need for funding can be demonstrated, the council seeks, wherever possible, to ensure that there is an element of flexibility built into the agreements to allow for changes in how that need can be met between the agreement being signed and the funding being received. The council has also adopted the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) under which most developer funding is now collected. A benefit of this is that unlike S106, CIL receipts are not subject to an expiry date.

B. Question from Councillor James to Councillor Edwards, Cabinet Member for Communications, Customer Services, Legal and Democratic

We make publicly available a livestream and a recording of most of our meetings. We also enable members of the public to attend and speak to the meeting online. This is very welcome and reflects the Council's priority to work in an open and inclusive way.

However, this is not an option for meetings of the full Council, despite our constitution saying that participation at the meeting for members of the public may be remotely via Teams. Due to the size of the Council, we meet in The Beacon in its largest meeting room, and it is not equipped for sound or video recording. In time we expect that these meetings will be held in a new purpose built headquarters in Didcot where hopefully such technology can be provided. However, plans to move to Didcot Gateway were announced in October 2020, but this is not likely to be ready until 2027 at the earliest, so we are in the middle of a long period where that cannot help us to make Council available to the public online.

I would like to ask the Cabinet member how we can provide some form of online access to full Council meetings in advance of moving to Didcot Gateway?

Written response

Establishing a short term online meeting system

The question comes from an understanding that there are significant differences between a fixed location meeting system and a remote system using a flexible space which is being used for other purposes for the majority of the time.

There are several technical hurdles which make a remote system challenging. Firstly the premises need to be able to deliver a sufficiently high capacity wi-fi system. Even if the system is capable, it also need to have sufficient security and ensure that the system is secured from breach. The equipment needs to be capable of being moved and put back in place. Even small changes of camera and microphone location can significantly impact video systems or sound quality.

Costs of any system will need to include tracking cameras, microphones capable of being linked through a sound system, audio equipment. Meeting technology has moved significantly in the last 5 years and is likely to continue to do so – this means that there is a potential risk that the system might not be easily capable of connecting to a future market standard system.

Officers are aware that other Councils installing permanent systems have incurred six figure costs to do so, and that installation has taken over a year. No relevant budget covering sums of this level are established in the budget for 2025/26.

Officers therefore cannot recommend a temporary system at present.

C. Question from Councillor Patel to Councillor Foulsham, Cabinet Member for Policy and Programmes

In relation to our leisure facilities strategy, our consultant STA had highlighted Shrivenham as having “the most unmet demand” for pool facilities.

Looking through the consultation comments, I note that several responses have highlighted the general lack of leisure and sports facilities in the further Western region, with Shrivenham pointed to as a suitable location given its size and connectivity. I also note a number of comments around the focus of the strategy on driving times as the default mode of transport to access facilities.

In May’s council I had asked whether a more detailed viability assessment could be carried out on how the unmet demand in Shrivenham could be addressed. At the time the member in charge felt it inappropriate to comment while the consultation comments were being reviewed.

Can I ask the cabinet member to outline what weight was given to and considerations made towards addressing the unmet needs to Shrivenham residents for pool facilities?

Written response

Sport England Facility Planning Model (FPM) reports were produced for swimming pools and sports halls to support the Leisure Facilities Assessment and Strategies (LFAS). These use population projections and have modelled sport take up rates to determine the capacity of our facilities across the district. When assessing swimming pool capacity, the FPM report concludes that “*where the most unmet demand [for*

swimming] can be met is in Shrivenham, at 32 sqm of water. This will include unmet demand from Swindon and is an insufficient amount to consider provision of a new swimming pool.”

(To provide context, context, the minimum amount of reachable water space required to justify a new pool would be 160 sqm, which is a 20m x 8m four-lane pool).

Unmet demand for swimming pool capacity in the district is very low. Nearly all the unmet demand is due to being too far from a facility, rather than existing facilities being over capacity or being forecast to be over capacity. The unmet demand from lack of swimming pool capacity generated by growth in our own district is less than 5 sqm of water. The demand is slightly higher in Shrivenham at 32m² due to demand imported from Swindon and residents being located too far from a facility rather than lack of pool capacity. Given that a new pool's size threshold is 160m², we are significantly below the threshold for justifying a new swimming pool in the Shrivenham area in both circumstances.

In terms of travelling to facilities, the FPM do assess cycle times to facilities. They found, at the point in time of developing the reports, that *87% of our residents are within a 20-minute cycle ride (approximately four miles) of a swimming pool in both 2023 (the start date of the study) and 2041 (the end date)*. Furthermore, the emerging Joint Local Plan contains policy HP5 (New facilities for sport, physical activity, and recreation) which specifies that new facilities should be accessible by walking, cycling and public transport. Nevertheless, there will be some locations in within the district that are too far from a swimming pool (both by driving, and by sustainable and active travel) because it is not possible to achieve complete coverage.

The FPM report affirms that current and future demand for swimming pools can be met by the available supply of pools. The LFAS does however recommend a new learner pool at Wantage Leisure Centre and in Faringdon to help alleviate capacity issues for main pools.

D. Question from Councillor de la Harpe to Councillor Edwards, Cabinet Member for Communications, Customer Services, Legal and Democratic

This Council has an active and effective Communications Team who communicate regularly with residents via several social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). For obvious reasons, this Council does not publish on party-political channels, such as a Liberal Democrat newsletter to residents, and neither do Council members ask the Communications Team to publish party-political statements to voters.

In recent months, however, Elon Musk has transformed X and, in my opinion, used it to influence an election.

Does the cabinet member agree with me that X is now a party-political mouthpiece and that this Council should begin a process of withdrawing its presence on X and cease using it as a channel to communicate with our residents?

Written response

It's very clear that X is a social media platform going through a significant amount of change, and in some respects, it is in a steep decline. However, the Communications team and I have discussed the matter, and have concluded there is no way X could be considered an official mouthpiece for a British political party and the council will not be ceasing use of it at this time. When any given social media platform is used responsibly by members of our communities, we have a responsibility to communicate with them on their chosen channel if it's effective to do so.

However, as the nature of social media is ever-changing, the communications team keep our use of the various platforms under constant review. Probably the most important and straightforward question they ask themselves is, do we reach enough people to justify the amount of time and effort that goes into it?

The amount of people we reach on X has been in decline for a while, partly due to residents leaving the platform, and partly because X is no longer prioritising content generated by UK local government accounts.

The team tell me that their counterparts at our neighbouring authorities are noticing similar trends and the team have been monitoring how other public and commercial organisations are changing their approach to the platform.

A few weeks ago, the team and I discussed that they've already significantly reduced the amount we are posting on X to align with the decrease in reach on the platform. In the meantime, they have been redirecting resources to creating bigger campaigns on our existing, more effective platforms like Facebook, Next Door, Instagram, Threads and LinkedIn. They are always trying out alternative platforms like WhatsApp and BlueSky – and the Beacon now even has a TikTok account to try and reach new audiences.

E. Question from Councillor Smith to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council

Network Rail have announced they will pause work on the Oxford Station project for 17 days over Christmas. This news only adds to the frustration of residents and business in my ward over the lack of information about how much longer the Botley Road will be closed for.

I note the Transport Secretary agreed to meet Layla Moran MP to discuss the 'unacceptable' delays to this project, but then resigned her post before the meeting could be arranged.

Has the Leader had any more luck in getting an update from Network Rail or national government about the timeline for the Oxford Station project that she can share?

Written response

In short, no.

Replacing the rail bridge across Botley Road needs the railway to be closed for several days and that has to be planned and booked a long way in advance. At the time of preparing this answer, the date for this has not yet been set.

The information from Network Rail is that they have recently met with the rail minister and are closely engaged with the Department for Transport. I am hoping for an opportunity to meet with the senior team from Network Rail in the new year when I can remind them of the impact on our communities.

I'd just like to clarify a point of detail on the Christmas break. It is specifically the work by Thames Water on the water main which will be paused on 20 December, in order to remove the parking suspension from residential streets and allow local residents to park as normal during the holiday period. Network Rail themselves will be working up until 24 December.

Having said that, I am obviously not here to defend Network Rail. The prolonged delays to this project have caused huge disruption to our residents and businesses in the Botley area, and I will keep on pushing Network Rail very hard to give us a clear timetable to complete the project.

F. Question from Councillor Gascoigne to Councillor Crawford, Cabinet Member for Finance and Property

Getting appointments to see a GP continues to be difficult across the district and indeed the country. In Didcot and the surrounding villages, this has been particularly difficult due to the growth in housing numbers and BOB ICB not yet providing the promised GP surgery on Great Western Park.

I understand that the Vale officers have been working with the local NHS body, BOB ICB, to facilitate its delivery.

Can the cabinet member provide an update with where we are, a projected timeline for delivery and what the next steps are?

Written response

The council is currently working with key stakeholders to progress the GP surgery on Great Western Park. The next step in the project is for the medical centre's appointed developer to submit a planning application, which we are expecting before the end of January. The Local Planning Authority will then need to determine the application, which will take a few months. In line with the LPA's published timescales, we are anticipating a decision by mid-2025.

In the meantime, work is well underway to arrange transfer of the site from Taylor Wimpey to the council; all parties are finalising their due diligence before transfer can take place. Once the site is transferred, respective legal teams will work together to complete the various lease and funding agreements. Whilst these matters are already well progressed, timescales will depend on resolving some final matters and making sure the necessary steps are taken to complete the agreements in the right order.

Council officers meet regularly with the NHS Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB), medical practice and their appointed developer, to ensure things continue to progress.

Thank you

Cllr Mark Coleman on behalf of Cllr Andrew Crawford