

Questions by Members – Council – 27 September 2023

<u>Written Question</u>	<u>Written Answer</u>	<u>Verbal Supplementary Question</u>	<u>Verbal Supplementary Answer</u>
Q1 – Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, to Councillor Dan Levy, Executive Member for Finance.			
<p>What adjustment measures is the Executive Member for Finance contemplating to bring the budget back on track in the second half of the current fiscal year given the significant shortfall in income thus far, mainly investment property rent, and which is likely to continue for the rest of the fiscal year?</p>	<p>The Council set the 2023/24 budget in February 2023 with a net operating expenditure total of circa £16m for the year to March 2024. The Quarter One Financial Performance showed an overall overspend of £0.3m against budget, largely due to vacant rental properties at Des Roches, Talisman & Marriotts Close during the first part of the year.</p> <p>Measures have been taken to attract new tenants which has been successful. New leases have recently been agreed at all three sites. The Council receives regular advice from its property agents to ensure that rental terms are optimised. The in-year budget will continue to be monitored closely, and the full year budgetary impact of vacant properties will be updated within Quarter 2 reporting.</p> <p>A ‘line by line’ review of all budgets is currently also being undertaken by officers in advance of proposals being presented to</p>	<p>I thank him for the answer that he provided. I must say that the answer relates to the next financial year, whereas my question is about this financial year. So, given that we are at the halfway point, and we must have some forecasts, what is your forecast for the drawdown from the general reserve fund for the year as a whole, and would you agree with me that this could be £1,000,000 plus?</p>	<p>Specifically answering the question, I think that clearly there has been a problem with forecasting and I wouldn’t disagree with that, and as part of the budget process for next year, and as part of the reporting for this year, you will see how we’re doing. However, I don’t think we should be as negative as you appear to be – We have done a fantastic job of filling vacancies in the properties that we own. They will produce rental income for this Council, which is very much needed, and as Councillor Enright has previously said, you just have to look at Marriott’s Walk and how lively it is with its new tenants, to see that we are doing the right thing. I think that it is clearly disappointing to have less income than we were forecasting, but I don’t think that reflects in any way a bad performance. You will see that it will come right.</p>

	<p>Council with regard to the 2024/25 budget. As part of this, a specific review of investment property vacancy rate assumptions is being undertaken to ensure that the estimates contained within the budget are as accurate and prudent as possible.</p>		
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Q2 – Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for Environment.

<p>What progress has the Executive Member for the Environment made with Thames Water in reaching a binding agreement or undertaking to reduce sewage pollution in our waterways as previously announced in a press release dated 24 March 2023?</p>	<p>Since the press release dated 24th March, progress continues to be made in regard to reducing sewage pollution in our waterways. The Validation Checklist has now been fully embedded within the Council Planning team and is pro-actively avoiding situations where developers were submitting plans that will have a detrimental impact on the existing sewage infrastructure, which in many locations is not meeting current levels of demand. Regular meetings with Thames Water (TW) have continued, which have focused on verifying the capacity of the 9 main Sewage Treatment Works (SWT) within the district to ensure that TW investment plans adequately meet both current and future demands. This</p>	<p>Thank you for the answer. I asked for what progress has been made since the press release of March, and the answer seems to be mostly about that, but I haven't come across anything new. So could you try again, and also you say that an agreement in principle has been reached. That was the situation back in March, but where is that agreement? Can we have more information on that?</p>	<p>The Grampian conditions are at the final stage now. The Officers are working very hard at the moment relaying the matrix of that condition, and it is going back and forth between our group and the groups within Thames Water. I expect the final version will be signed off very soon, hopefully within the next two weeks. A lot of work went into it, and it is a very important document, because we have to do that legally and responsibly, and equally, Thames Water want to do it the same way. In terms of progress on our work with Thames Water, apart from the Grampian conditions as Councillor Al-Yousuf already knows, we have introduced validation checklists for the sewage pollution and for infrastructure in our planning applications. That is</p>
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	<p>work has also challenged the fundamental elements of the way capacity is calculated, which has resulted in TW working closer with the Council's Local Planning Team.</p> <p>An agreement in principle has been reached with Thames Water who will refine their planning responses to the Council such as firstly acknowledge that there is an issue and secondly, wherever possible, that they will specify what is required to resolve the issues and by when that will be delivered. This will address the vast majority of cases but more recently our officers have additionally been working with their counterparts at TW to refine the condition such that it splits out the differences between 'Network' and 'Sewage Treatment' upgrades and is nuanced as regards whether it is a known and planned development where the required works are already identified or the far lesser number of schemes where the development has come in "off plan" and the required works to ameliorate the impacts have yet to be specified. This has resulted in</p>		<p>the first step to actually screen against planning applications that are in places where no developments should really be permitted, because there is no chance of further improving Thames Water infrastructure being taken into consideration.</p> <p>In addition, we have worked very hard with Thames Water, to resolve many different issues and more localised issues within the district of sewage infiltration, storm protection and on cracking pipes, like the ones in Eynsham and Brize Norton. So, there is a lot of work going on, and I suppose at some point soon, we will be able to bring that into public knowledge.</p>
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	<p>the production of a working model matrix.</p> <p>The Council will be running another 'Waterways' Day on the 23 November in the Corn Exchange, Witney, building upon the success of last year's event. This year the Environment Agency will be attending and presenting, along with other organisations including Thames Water, Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP), Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), The Evenlode Catchment Partnership / Wild Oxfordshire & Blenheim Estates.</p>		
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Q3 – Councillor Alaa Al-Yousuf, to Councillor Duncan Enright, Deputy Leader of the Council and Executive Member for Economic Development.

<p>Could the Executive Member for Economic Development please update the Council on the source and terms of funding for the purchase of Marriott's Walk?</p>	<p>The Council did not borrow externally to fund the purchase of Marriott's Walk, and instead utilised internal funding built up from balances and reserves held. Indeed, currently the Council holds no external borrowing and therefore pays no interest.</p>	<p>The answer was that the Council did not borrow, although the business case that was presented a year ago or more, envisaged potential borrowing from the public works loan board, when interest rates were very low at the time, and could potentially have been fixed for 30 years at that level. That would have been an opportunity to secure very long-term cheap funding and release the Council's cash for other capital projects. Why did that not happen? Did you miss the</p>	<p>Yes, thank you very much indeed for following up on this, and can I thank Councillor Al-Yousuf as well as others across this chamber for their involvement in that through the Investment Oversight Board. I think that was a piece of work that was well done, and one that has cemented the long-term future of Marriott's Walk as a regeneration project, as well as making sure it was a sound use of the Council's money. I'm quite clear that this Executive is prudent in its use of taxpayers'</p>
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		<p>opportunity, and do you have any regrets about that?</p>	<p>money, and I know that our Officers follow that as well.</p> <p>I am confident that we made the best decision of the use of our resources in this case, but I take his point. Thank you.</p>
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Q4 – Councillor Michele Mead, to Councillor Dan Levy, Executive Member for Finance.

<p>In the February 2023 budget, sixteen growth requests were made. Can you please tell us how many of these roles have been filled and into which positions?</p>	<p>Of the 16 posts included as growth items within the 2023/24 Budget (set back in February of this year), it should first be emphasised that some of these related to converting previously fixed term contracts to permanent posts, and some also related to shared posts with other partner councils as part of the Publica arrangement.</p> <p>That said 12 of these posts have been filled in the areas of Democratic Services, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Waste Management, Customer Services, Empty Homes, Regulatory Services, Flooding, Asset Management, Cyber Security, Climate Change and Market Towns.</p> <p>Proposals to recruit 3 specialist shared Human Resources staff have not been progressed, due</p>	<p>Thank you for your response. My question is on the final bit of your substantive answer where you say that the recruitment of an additional finance member of staff is currently going on. Have you got a timeline on this, because surely out of the 16 people you were going to employ, this should have been a priority, rather being left to one of the last people to employ?</p>	<p>I don't think it's through the want of trying! It is certainly not a low priority, but I certainly agree with you that it is an important post and that we do need to fill it. I'm sure the new Section 151 Officer will be as keen as I am to get this filled.</p>
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	<p>the lack of agreement with partner councils. The recruitment of an additional member of Finance staff is also currently ongoing and is therefore a work in progress.</p>		
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Q5 – Councillor Michele Mead, to Councillor Andy Graham, Leader of the Council.

<p>Did the Executive have their proposed 'Away Day', and if so, when will members hear the outcomes and be advised of any KPIs set?</p>	<p>The Executive did hold an 'Away Day' at the end of May this year. The purpose of the Away Day was to discuss the challenging financial picture facing the Council, and for a strategic discussion to take place on how the Council might respond in terms of service transformation, investment, and revenue generation.</p> <p>The discussion on the day fed into the first stages of the budget process for next year's budget (2024/25) and into early stages of work to revise the medium-term financial strategy. Both the budget and medium-term financial strategy will be reported through to Executive, Scrutiny and Council in due course.</p> <p>The Away Day did not set any new key performance indicators. On 13 September, the</p>	<p>I'm glad you enjoyed your away day, Councillor Graham. Can you give us an idea on when we will be presented with the Budget and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy? It's quite hard to trust that this is going to happen anytime soon, considering the way you have been managing the budget this year.</p>	<p>As you know from being a Leader, we do follow due process, and due process has been planned. If you look at the plans for the Budget, those are in keeping with normal practise, and that will continue. I think, in a way, that the budget has been managed really well by this Council, and there is nothing to suggest otherwise. I would actually just say that some of the external things that affect our budget, are things that this Conservative Government are bereft of actually addressing. When we get our local settlement that is constantly left until the last minute, it leaves all authorities in a very difficult position, So in a sense, I can say that apart from external, which we can't affect, other than putting pressure on the Government, which seems to have little impact, we are as a Council very diligent in terms of due</p>
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	Executive resolved to ask officers to review the performance indicator data set to better reflect the emerging priorities and actions in the revised Council Plan.		process, and that will be followed through.
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Q6 – Councillor Liam Walker, to Councillor Alaric Smith, Executive Member for Leisure and Major Projects.

Can the Executive Member confirm if Woodstock swimming pool will open next year on the same reduced opening times as this year?	<p>For the Summer season of 2023, the difficult decision was made to reduce the opening dates for Woodstock Outdoor Pool, due the energy price crisis which was being faced in the leisure industry (and throughout the UK) at the time.</p> <p>The outdoor pool operates as a loss-making service each year, but this loss is subsidised by the income generating elements of the Leisure contract as a whole. This is true for a number of the provided leisure services; however, the intention is that by combining the whole leisure offer with our appointed leisure contractor, we are able to deliver as many services as possible that suit the needs and requirements of the users, by combining profits and losses whilst still returning a</p>	On the topic of Government funding, will the Leader then agree to reply to Sport England? The Government announced a £60 million pot of funding towards leisure centres. Will this Council be applying for that fund, and if so, a reminder that the deadline is 17 October 2023!	<p><i>(answered by Councillor Graham, Leader of the Council)</i></p> <p>Thank you. That is noted.</p>
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	<p>positive management fee payment to the Council.</p> <p>For the summer season of 2024, it is hoped that we will be able to return to a standard contract position for the outdoor pool, whereby it will open in April through to September. However, whilst energy prices have stabilised, they still remain high, and discussions will need to be made with GLL Better in the New Year to ascertain the financial burden that may still exist above the forecast losses from the original contract tender. Wherever possible, mitigations will be made to reach the contract position or as close to it as possible.</p>		
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Q7 – Councillor Thomas Ashby, to Councillor Lidia Arciszewska, Executive Member for Environment.

<p>There are a lot of housing estates whereby greenspaces, including woodland areas are maintained by West Oxfordshire District Council. The Council has a Tree Management Policy whereby the Council absolves much responsibility, meaning residents need to pay from their own pocket if there is a tree overhanging their boundary or causing issues with</p>	<p>The trees owned by West Oxfordshire District Council are managed under the Council's Tree Management Policy, which was approved by Council several years ago. The policy enables Officers to prioritise tree works in line with Council priorities and budgets. The main priority is to</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>N/A</p>
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<p>their property. This is not fair. There are many elderly people who have issues with trees close to their property who shouldn't have to have the stress or pay out of their own pocket for tree maintenance.</p> <p>Therefore, will the Executive Member ask officers to review West Oxfordshire District Council's Tree Management Plan, to ensure that trees which affect residential property can be investigated and maintained at a resident's or Councillors request?</p>	<p>ensure that the tree stock is maintained in a safe condition.</p> <p>If Members of the public contact the Council to ask if non-safety works can be carried out to trees near their properties, these trees are inspected by the Tree Officer to ensure that they are not a risk to people or property. If they are not in an unsafe condition, in line with the policy, residents are advised that they are able to cut any branches back to their property boundary, at their own cost; however, the Council will not undertake this work.</p> <p>The tree team are currently considering how issues relating to trees on residential housing estates will be resolved, and an option appraisal is in its early stages and will be brought forward at such times when fully complete where members will be given more detailed and costed options.</p> <p>Consideration within this review will consider assistance to vulnerable members of the community and possibly those receiving benefits and subsidence living.</p>		
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