

Wiltshire Council

Council

21 July 2020

Councillor Questions Update

Questions Received

1. A total of 8 questions from Councillors have been received since the last meeting of Full Council on 16 June 2020.
2. Details of the question submitted and the order they will be received at the meeting are shown at Appendix 1. Responses are included at Appendix 2.
3. Of the 8 questions received, 3 were deemed to be operational, however, the Chair considered it to be reasonable to include these questions on this occasion as councillors had previously been asked not to submit questions to staff during the Covid-19 response. Details of these questions are also shown at Appendix 1 and responses are included at Appendix 2.
4. A total of 5 non-operational question were received before the first deadline of 7 July 2020 and were therefore guaranteed a written response as attached to this report.
5. The Chairman will go through the questions and responses, as is customary, take them as read and giving the questioner an opportunity to ask one relevant supplementary question for each question submitted. In accordance with Part 4 of the Constitution members were requested to submit their questions in priority order.

Proposal

6. To receive the questions as detailed.

Stuart Figini, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Appendix 1 - Councillor Questions Summary

Appendix 2 - Questions received

Appendix 1 - Councillor Submitted Questions Summary

Questions will be received in the order listed below as specified in the Constitution - so that every member who submitted a question has the opportunity to ask a supplementary prior to another member having the opportunity to ask a second supplementary.

Questions for Council (attached at Appendix 2)

Ref	Questioner	Date Received	Written or Verbal	Subject	Cabinet Member
20_16	Cllr Ian Thorn	29/6/2020	Written	Council Leader - Workloads	Cllr Whitehead
20_19	Cllr Stewart Palmen	6/7/2020	Written	Cutting of grass verges – (Operational) with response	Cllr Wayman
20_20	Cllr Ben Anderson	6/7/2020	Written	IT System's supporting remote working long term	Cllr Blair-Pilling
20_21	Cllr Edward Kirk	6/7/2020	Written	Residual and recyclable waste collected during the lockdown – (Operational) with response	Cllr Bridget Wayman
20_22	Cllr Mary Champion	6/7/2020	Written	COVID-19 Impact on Council buildings use and running costs (Operational)	Cllr Church
20_23	Cllr Tom Rounds	13/7/202	Written	Libraries during Covid	Cllr Blair-Pilling
20_17	Cllr Ian Thorn	1/7/2020	Written	Section 114 Notice	Cllr Church
20_18	Cllr Ian Thorn	1/7/2020	Written	Revised budget for 2020/2021	Cllr Church

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From Councillor Ian Thorn, Calne Central Division

To Councillor Philip Whitehead, Leader of the Council

Question (20-16)

How is the Leader of the Council finding the time to run Wiltshire Council during a pandemic, serve his residents in Urchfont and The Cannings, as well as the residents of By Brook?

Response

The election for the By Brook Division vacancy was postponed until 6 May 2021 by regulations made under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

There is no provision in legislation or in the Constitution for the allocation of a Member's divisional responsibilities in these circumstances. However, by convention this normally falls to the relevant Group Leader to decide to ensure that constituents are appropriately represented.

I do not think that it is a matter of time it is simply about looking at the most efficient way to react to the circumstances that face you at a certain time. And we have done that.

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From Councillor Stewart Palmen, Trowbridge Central

To Councillor Bridget Wayman, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Question (20-19)

During the Covid crisis many verges were left uncut and many of them developed into nice looking long grass and wildflower areas. Have we (Wiltshire Council) considered reducing the cutting, in places where safe to do so, to help improve the ecology of those areas while at the same time reducing the cost of the cutting? Town councils are already doing this (please see attached sign from Salisbury Town Council).

Response

The Council undertakes the cutting of a large quantity of grass which includes some highway verges and amenity areas within the built urban environment.

One outcome from the effects of the Covid situation was that amenity cutting of grass within urban areas was suspended for a period of time until operational adjustments could be made for the workforce. This led to many areas growing to a much longer length than has previously expected.

Prior to Covid the authority has been considering its mowing practices with a view to improving the ecological value of grassed areas. A number of public open spaces have been identified for a trial and now receive a reduced frequency of cut. To realise the full value of such areas it is not sufficient to simply reduce frequency of cutting, it is important that cuttings are collected and removed. This process reduces soil fertility and increases the diversity of plants. While the Council is committed to working to increase bio-diversity it does need to recognise that savings from reductions in cutting must be offset by additional costs related to the collection and disposal of cuttings.

The Council wrote to all the Town and Parish councils in December 2019 advising of the outcome of the wildflower consultation and continues to receive and assess the suitability of further locations to expand the current schemes. The list of sites can be found @ <http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/highways-streetscene-enhanced-services>.

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From Councillor Ben Anderson, Corsham Without & Box Hill

**To Councillor Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for ICT, Digitalisation,
Operational Assets, Leisure & Libraries**

Question (20-20)

The impacts of Covid-19 have shown that we need our IT estate to support effective remote working in the long-term. Given previous major ICT outages (February 2020), and the inherent vulnerabilities facing IT systems such as Wiltshire Council's, what assurances can be given that our IT estate is sufficiently robust and will be properly supported long-term?

Response

ICT have been working flat out to make sure your information systems are as secure and reliable as they possibly can be. One aspect of resilience works that have been planned and are currently being executed is governed under a Programme called 99% (*aim being to ensure 99% compute availability*). This Programme has five key principles:

1. **Simplification:** We are replacing three aging backup solutions with one centrally administered solution. This solution is also more secure as it has physical separation of the data from the back up but can be accessed quickly when it is needed. This is called an air-gapped backup and it's the modern equivalent of off-site backup tape storage.
2. **Rationalisation:** Our server platform uses hundreds of virtual servers and databases – we are working to reduce and rationalise the numbers of servers to approximately half the existing number.
3. **Stabilisation:** We are making sure that our core systems are up to date and reliable. We will improve the use of existing facilities augmented with a targeted technology refresh to deliver stable ICT service. We will also look at our processes to ensure we have both systems and processes that support the business through any major incident and system loss.
4. **Efficiency:** We are introducing new and simplified system monitoring. This will provide ICT with insights into systems performance, but also allow users to see systems' performance for themselves and promote reactive fault resolution within ICT.
5. **Investment in Staff:** We are working to ensure our staff are trained to use all the tools across the technology platform and we will have a support structure aligned to our organisational needs.

This work places us in a much better position and will give us more secure, reliable ICT. Should there be a major problem If we have a disaster we will be better equipped to respond and recover quickly. It also makes us fitter for the uncertain future of working patterns post COVID-19.

Progress has been rapid following the ICT Outage in February 2020. We expect an air-gapped back up solution to be in place by August 2020, rationalisation of servers to be complete by October 2020 with new system monitoring to be in place at the same time. Stabilisation through updated systems and training for staff are both in progress and the full set of current activities will be complete by the end of this year, in December 2020.

Other aspects of work that has been undertaken, that are more visible to ICT Users and have enabled both Council staff & Police to access applications and therefore work remotely are the:

- Introduction of Microsoft Teams (Teams being a collaboration application that has enabled real-time video calls and provides our organisation (and affiliated org's e.g. NHS) with a secure workspace platform for real-time meetings, file and app sharing).
- Increased Internet bandwidth connections, required to facilitate staff connecting their PC's from home and then accessing (securely) other established cloud based applications (e.g. Liquid Logic).
- Increased remote working technology: Much of our application estate is hosted within our two data centres and to enable several hundred people to access these applications remotely from home, concurrently and reliably our 'Direct Access' capability required re-engineering and strengthening. (e.g. increased use of CITRIX technology)

We will continue to evolve our technology and systems in a way which is suited to public sector organisations in a post COVID-19 world, including maximising the capability of Microsoft Teams to offer telephony functions, improvements on collaboration as well as making cost efficiencies and simplifying infrastructure.

We are also continuing our strategy of acquiring Cloud based systems when this presents as a cost effective option as these are resilient and suited to modern patterns of work. Lastly when looking at Covid-19 Recovery, we will be developing capability in areas like process automation and data exploitation to ensure the services delivered by the Council, and the internal operation of the Council, is both effective and efficient, tuned to the needs of our communities and the staff who deliver, even though working patterns, the context and place of delivery may change.

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From Councillor Edward Kirk, Trowbridge Adcroft

To Councillor Bridget Wayman, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Question (20-21)

Has there been an increase in tonnages of residual and recyclable waste collected during the lockdown period?

Response:

The total tonnes of residual and recyclable waste collected during the lockdown period (April and May 2020) have been compared with an average of the tonnes collected in April and May 2018 and 2019.

This comparison shows an increase of 10% (1,754 tonnes) in residual waste managed during this period, whilst there were reductions in the tonnages of recycling (37%) and garden waste (13%). Overall, when all three material streams are combined this shows a 12% (4,780 tonnes) reduction in material collected in April and May 2020.

However, when the impact on *kerbside collected* waste and recycling is assessed, this shows an increase of 22% in the total tonnage of kerbside collected residual waste, recyclable and composting tonnages during April and May 2020.

During April and May 2020, the increases in kerbside collected materials were as follows:

- 26% increase in residual waste
- 27% increase in dry recyclables
- 8% increase in garden waste

It should be noted that the council implemented a new kerbside mixed dry recycling service from 9 March 2020, with the intention that the tonnes of recyclable materials collected at the kerbside would increase as a consequence of making the collection system easier to use and promoting the service to all residents. All waste collection services were maintained during the period of the lockdown.

A contributing factor to the increases in kerbside collected tonnage, and the reduction in overall waste arisings, will be that all household recycling centres (HRCs) were closed due to the Covid-19 lockdown between 24 March and 17 May 2020, and only partially re-opened from 18 May to 7 June, resulting in a reduction of 92% in materials managed at the HRCs.

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From Councillor Mary Champion, Royal Wootton Bassett North

**To Councillor Pauline Church, Cabinet Member for Finance & Procurement and
Commercial Investment**

Question (20-22)

How has the Covid-19 crisis impacted on the use and cost of running the Council's buildings?

Response

The current budget monitoring forecast financial position includes maintenance savings of £0.187m and a utilities savings of £0.231m from buildings being closed April to June. As part of the planning of reopening buildings safely additional costs of £0.507m are forecast for items such as cleaning and materials for additional measures to reopen building and return to work which off-set the savings.

Budget monitoring for quarter 1 (period 3) is underway and the indication is that further savings are likely as some buildings remain closed in July with savings likely to increase by approximately £0.200m offset by further estimated costs for re-opening of approximately £0.400m.

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From Councillor Tom Rounds, Calne North

**To Councillor Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for ICT, Digitalisation,
Operational Assets, Leisure and Libraries**

Question (20-23)

We closed our libraries as instructed to help prevent the spread of Covid-19, but what have they been doing to help our communities during lockdown, especially our vulnerable people and our children who have not been able to attend school?

Response

While our library buildings have been closed our library services has been busy supporting the health and wellbeing of our communities, vulnerable people and children. We increased the number of eBooks, eAudio and eMagazines to specifically help those with loneliness and home schooling. We made it possible to join our libraries online ensuring these services were available to new library members. Library memberships increased during lockdown. We moved our regular activities online including rhyme times, tea and chat sessions, author talks, using Facebook and the new Wiltshire Libraries YouTube channel. These activities generated over 98,000 online views.

We created 16 activity packs to support children learning at home, these have been downloaded over 1,000 times. We set up, and continue to deliver, a non-contact Home Library Service reaching 102 vulnerable residents in Wiltshire. We continued our Prison library service. Alongside all of this Library staff were redeployed to the Wellbeing helpline, distribution centre and other departments supporting the Covid-19 response.

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From Councillor Ian Thorn, Calne Central Division

To Councillor Pauline Church, Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement and Commercial Investment

Question (20-17)

What would be the last opportunity (date) to issue a Section 114 notice for this financial year?

Response

The last logistical date that the Section 151 Officer could issue a section 114 notice for this, and indeed any financial year, is the last day of the financial year i.e. 31st March.

It should be noted that it is only the Council's Section 151 Officer that can issue a Section 114 notice, not the Cabinet Member, Leader or Cabinet.

However, the recent announcement from Government, as reported in the Section 151 officer's commentary to Cabinet, is likely to greatly improve the Council's forecast financial position to the extent that it no longer represents a potential section 114 notice situation.

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From Councillor Ian Thorn, Calne Central Division

To Councillor Pauline Church, Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement and Commercial Investment

Question (20-18)

When will Wiltshire Council issue its revised budget for 2020/21?

Response

The response and ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and long lasting impact on the Councils finances. It is imperative that regular update and monitoring of the budget is undertaken during this time, which is why the Cabinet committed to have regular reporting of the Councils financial position, which is then also subject to the COVID-19 scrutiny task group.

The reports have clearly and transparently set out the scale of the impact, as well as the assumptions, the uncertainty and risks the Council faces.

These updates will continue for the foreseeable future. The content of these reports, as with any financial year when a forecast overspend is reported, will include any management actions and/or Cabinet decisions that are required to mitigate and balance the budget will be put forward, and in turn these will also be subject to the scrutiny process.