



Council

Monday 20 July 2020

Agenda Item 9 (a), Written Questions

Question From: Councillor Conrad Copeland

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Castle Quay

Question

“Given the new economic realities and the increased economic uncertainty of the Covid-19 crisis, is there an updated risk assessment available to councillors for the Castle Quay development that takes into account the potential vulnerabilities of each tenant and any concessions that may need to be offered to them to maintain their presence in the centre?”

Response

“The current economic climate has presented challenges across all sectors of commerce and property has not been immune from this. Castle Quay Shopping has seen a reduction in rental income during this period from tenants mainly as a result of Central Government initiatives to protect companies and jobs. Stimulus Policies that have been introduced and continue to be developed will enable businesses to re-start as they emerge from this crisis and start to pay back dated rents over the coming months. The Council has adopted a policy of rental deferment to those tenants requesting assistance to help them through this unprecedented period which sits alongside other well documented Central Government easing such as business rates.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Officers alongside professional advisers analyse the financial viability of companies trading at Castle Quay Shopping and act decisively where possible to proactively protect the Councils Asset. Commercially sensitive risk assessments on the vulnerabilities both financially and market sectors of tenants are reviewed on a regular basis and reported back to the cross-party Castle Quay Advisory Group. This Advisory Group is made aware of these potential vulnerable tenants and the action Officers are taking to mitigate any losses to tenants and jobs both on a reactive basis as well as delivering medium / long term initiatives.

Throughout the Lockdown, Officers have worked tirelessly keeping elements of Castle Quay Shopping open to meet the needs of residents and those tenants chosen to remain open and trading. At Castle Quay Waterfront, works have



continued under strict supervision by officers to ensure our Banbury's vision for a new leisure development continues to be delivered. Risk Assessments on the viability of the Councils Assets have not been interrupted throughout this challenging period with the Castle Quay Advisory Group meeting throughout.

Even before the unprecedented situation that COVID-19 has presented the Council had already acknowledged the national shift in the retail market and the impact that was having on our own town centres. Since acquiring the Castle Quay shopping centre, the council has been proactive in continually addressing this shift and repurposing space. We are delivering Lock29 in the former BHS unit as a vibrant food and beverage anchor to reinvigorate this empty space and create a new destination within the town. Castle Quay Waterfront will see new and exciting leisure facilities, increasing the appeal of the town and to a wider audience, attracting new names and providing a welcome boost to Banbury's evening economy. The Council are investing responsibly and future proofing the town, responding to the needs of its residents and turning it into a true leisure and shopping destination which will secure long term tenants and jobs for the Town."

Question From: Councillor Ian Middleton

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Climate Emergency Motion

"A year ago this council passed a climate emergency motion promising a plan within 6 months and tangible action after that.

The motion made reference to the fact that we only had 10 years to set the planet on a course that would avoid climate meltdown. We now only have 9 years left to prevent that outcome. Yet in that time we have done next to nothing, while continuing to support fossil fuel investments and the destruction of our green belt.

The only palpable moves towards increasing the council's commitment to decarbonisation and climate change mitigation amount to little more than tokenism. There have been some paltry budget allocations, much of which was already in the pipeline anyway, and the engagement of environmental consultants whose narrow remit avoids much of the council's work in areas such as planning and development – a major cause of environmental degradation in Cherwell. We need to go further than that.

Whilst I appreciate the past 6 months we have been overtaken by events, climate change has not stood still. There should have been more progress made towards the goals set out in our climate emergency motion. COVID-19 has been one of the greatest threats our planet has faced, but it will be nothing compared to the misery, death and destruction that future generations will face if we don't halt climate change now.



When are we going to see coherent policies, leadership and action on meeting the commitments this council unanimously voted for in 2019?"

Response

"This Council over the last decade has been committed to reducing its impact on the environment and driving emissions down. It has had two carbon management plans, the first covered the period 2008 -2015, the second 2015-2020. These plans have helped drive our emissions down by 32%.

Since the motion to commit the Council to net zero a lot has been taking place, but like the emissions themselves not always visible. To deliver such ambitious & challenging reductions requires the construction of an appropriate communicable framework and ensuring action is embedded within the organisation, whilst engaging expertise and working in partnership with a wide range of partners. The approach is to ensure activity will take place across the entire 10 years needed and avoid a short-term glut of activity which runs the risk of fizzling out.

This Council engaged expert consultants, Bioregional & Aether to not only help formulate plans, approaches and milestones to achieve the net zero targets, but also to review a number of our current local plan policies through a climate emergency lens. This important piece of work is nearing completion and will help inform the evidence base and future policies of our Local Plan Review. The Local Plan review has identified the Climate Emergency as one of three over-riding cross cutting themes, and will be integral to the plans formation – the first consultation in the process is due shortly and we would strongly encourage you to engage in this fundamentally important piece of work.

The initial response was brought to the Executive in January 2020. A more detailed plan will come forward to the Executive in October 2020. The current Covid-19 emergency and the delays in engaging with elected members; due to purdah around the General election, have meant a short delay in the timetable of producing plans and some refocussing of this work, recognising the potential opportunities and cultural impact upon this agenda.

However, behind the scenes a large amount of activity has taken place to drive our emissions and the emissions of the district down. Some examples include Our fleet now has 50% of our small vehicles purely electric powered with four more vehicles having arrived since the climate change motion. Usually these vehicles are charged using electricity from our solar panels at Thorpe Lane depot. Overall 10% of our fleet is now electric and we are engaging with opportunities around vehicle to grid technologies, which could enhance our EV's to further decrease our carbon footprint.

Whilst under lockdown, we have entered into a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and others to install charging facilities at several of our car parks. This Park & Charge project will not only allow vehicle owners to charge their vehicles it will also provide charging at night for those residents who cannot charge their vehicles at their homes because they have no off- road parking. In Banbury alone this predicament affects more than 1,200 households who could



otherwise face being locked out of access to future zero emission infrastructure. The first charging points will appear later in 2020/21.

We have worked in partnership with a local company DCS to plant almost 40,000 trees on Banbury Country Park and since the declaration, have engaged in a partnership to produce an Oxfordshire woodland planting strategy, looking to highlight how and where future tree planting could take place.

We are installing more bicycle racks in the three urban centres in a project with the County Council to encourage active travel, whilst also working with the County Council to produce local walking and cycling infrastructure plans. Many of the initiatives require working in partnership and we have been building our links, especially with Oxfordshire County Council, with whom we are forming a joint team to deliver a challenging and extensive Climate Change programme to cut our emissions over the coming years.

The Council is committed to achieving net zero by 2030 and we do recognise both the enormity of the challenge and increase in activity that is needed, but with encouraging progress being made to date.”

Question From: Councillor Perran Moon

Question To: Leader of the Council, Councillor Barry Wood

Topic: Coronavirus

“As the UK is released from Coronavirus lockdown, the threat of local outbreaks such as that experienced in Leicester, has increased. The Oxfordshire Local Action Control Plan, while heavy on ‘aims’, ‘objectives’ and ‘themes’, does not actually contain a coherent Action Plan! Can Cherwell District Council please confirm what specific actions would be taken by this Council, in the event of a local spike in positive cases of coronavirus in our area?”

Further, our area employs many thousands of people in small and micro businesses which have had to temporarily shut during the coronavirus outbreak. The window for the application of the Cherwell District Council discretionary grant scheme was less than 2 weeks and many of our local businesses missed out, as they were simply not aware of it. For those businesses not eligible for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grant and which are not ‘rateable’, what additional support is Cherwell District Council offering, to prevent hundreds of local small businesses collapsing, with the consequent loss of jobs in our area?”

Response

Response to first paragraph

“We recognise the risk of outbreaks as we ease out of national lockdown. The aim of the local outbreak plan is to outline the overall approach of the principles of managing an outbreak. In addition to this it also details specific action plans



tailored to individual settings. These are based on existing arrangements that are already in place to manage outbreaks, which are highly effective. There are long established and robust systems and plans in the County to respond to monitoring and preventing the spread of communicable diseases in the County. In addition to this a range of local measures are also considered to contain the spread of the virus with differing levels of public interferences and clinical effectiveness. The implementation of these will be carefully considered through the newly formed COVID governance structures. The government is also considering what additional local powers will be required and these are yet to be finalised. The Public Health team and the local partners have a good understanding of the Oxfordshire population and what we need to do in order to respond to identified cases and limit spread of COVID-19. Local partners are working together through the newly set up COVID-19 Health Protection Board and have developed a Local Outbreak Control Plan which will strengthen on the existing outbreak plans, so that we are prepared for any second wave if it does arrive as we expect later in the year. We will continue to evolve this as the situation emerges further and we continue to develop our understanding about the virus.

However, we need the assistance of public in following the social distancing guidance. The best way to manage an outbreak is to prevent one in the first place. The pandemic is far from over, we are not relaxing our vigilance and do not want to lose the effects of the sacrifice and hard work of everyone so far. It is important to emphasise that this prevention message not just in areas where there are cases but for whole of Oxfordshire.

I can assure you that we have put in systems and process in place to manage and detect outbreaks, but it is really important that everyone in Oxfordshire also follows the key prevention message and stays alert at all time. I would very much appreciate if you could front this message to the public in your capacity.”

Response to second paragraph

“HM Government’s Discretionary Grant Scheme (DGS) is aimed at small businesses which fell outside the eligibility requirements of the earlier (and larger scale) Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant schemes.

Cherwell was awarded funding of around £26.7m for the earlier schemes and around £1.2m for the DGS. The DGS was, evidently, a significantly smaller scheme and would, inevitably, therefore only enable a small number of businesses to benefit from it.

The DGS award from HM Government to Cherwell represented approximately 5% of the funding allocation of the earlier Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant schemes funding allocation; the HM Government guidance makes it clear that the Council are not permitted to exceed the funding allocation.

The CDC Executive received a report, for its consideration, on 1 June 2020 which:

- *outlined the national criteria*



- *proposed different options for what a Cherwell scheme might look like*
- and*
- *recommended a policy to support Cherwell's scheme.*

As a result of this work, a policy was adopted by the Council.

As part of the new policy, and in the interests of fairness and equity, it was decided to allow businesses, and other organisations, a 13-day window for submitting applications. The window was open from 09:00 on Tuesday 2 June until midnight on 14 June.

This approach was preferred to the alternative option of "first-come-first-served". The preferred (and chosen) option meant that anyone could submit their application during the "open-window" period, secure in the knowledge that all applications would be reviewed, all at the same time, after the window had closed. All this information was clearly explained on a dedicated page on the CDC website, together with a link to the application form. In addition to the information on the website, a programme of local promotion was undertaken to publicise the scheme which built upon the national media exposure for the Discretionary Grant scheme.

Local promotion included:

- *producing a timely press release which was sent to all normal press contacts and media outlets;*
- *posting social media messages on the usual platforms which provided scope for followers to re-tweet/re-post/propagate;*
- *reaching out to local business-support partners (for instance Banbury BID, Chambers of Commerce, Bicester Vision, local business centres etc) to request them to promote the scheme to their members, levy payers and followers;*
- *working with OxLEP to ensure that the scheme was promoted on their website (along with other district schemes within Oxfordshire) and using their leverage with their own extensive media outlets – incidentally, OxLEP were running, during a similar period, their own business resilience grant scheme from which some Cherwell businesses benefited;*
- *having a high-profile banner headline on the CDC website home page during the period that the application window was open, promoting the Discretionary Grants scheme, with an embedded direct link to the relevant page giving the necessary information and access to the application form itself.*

It was inevitable that some businesses and organisations did not receive the messages, despite all actions documented above. On a positive note, officers are aware that the messages which were provided certainly provoked word of mouth awareness raising amongst interested parties – which assisted the overall effort towards greater dissemination.

At the time of writing this response the latest figures available were from 3 July 2020, Discretionary Grants totalling £812,500 have been paid to 108 local



businesses. This is in addition to the 1,913 businesses who have received grants totalling £25,115,000 under the original Grants schemes. The Discretionary Grants distribution process continues.

As regards the question about what additional support Cherwell District Council is offering – it is more complex than this because most of the financial assistance is originating from HM Government. This support is being distributed through several channels, sometimes directly from HMRC, sometimes from the banks, sometimes through local authorities and via other agencies. The support that is, and has been, available includes: Loans; business rates relief; tax relief; & cash grants.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) has been available for some time and has enabled employers to apply for staff to get up to 80% pay if they can't work. This scheme is now due to be tapered off slightly in July and ceased at the end of October.

Further details of Government assistance can be accessed via:

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/business-support>.

As regards Cherwell:

Officers have played an active part in distributing the government funding and continue to play their full part in ensuring local businesses, as far as is possible, benefit.

Business rates relief – the extended retail relief scheme means 100% business rates relief for the financial year 2020-21 – for occupied properties wholly or mainly used for leisure & as shops, restaurants, cafes, cinemas, live music venues, hotels, guest & boarding premises and self-catering accommodation.

Cherwell identified the eligible businesses, so that businesses didn't need to apply themselves, and the 100% relief was applied to just under 1,000 accounts (including nurseries) during the last week of March.

This is in addition to the various Business Grants schemes and Discretionary Grant schemes described above.

As part of the emergency structure that was stood-up for the COVID-19 pandemic response, we established a multi-disciplinary Business Community Support cell led by the Assistant Director - Growth and Economy to direct operations and engage with the rest of the organisation, central government and other business support partners (such as OxLEP) involved in providing a united and co-ordinated response to this unprecedented situation.

As we move into the Recovery phase, a new CDC/OCC structure is being stood up including a themed group reporting directly to CEDR called the Economic Recovery Group (ERG) and its first meeting will take place during August. The ERG will be chaired by a Corporate Director. All of the Council's economic



recovery response will be directed by this new group – services to the Cherwell business community will continue to be provided through the Council's Growth and Economy teams and other parts of the organisation.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is a health emergency – but, equally, it is a global economic emergency, as well. We do not know the full impact of the damage to the Cherwell and Oxfordshire economies; it is likely that the economic implications will endure even after the health aspects are brought under greater control. The recovery phase is going to be important here and, as indicated above, work is already starting on this – but it is expected to take some years to resolve. Set against the scale and enormity of the potential economic impact of the pandemic, it must be acknowledged that the Council has limited resources and ability to prevent local businesses closing and unemployment increasing but it can work towards creating an environment to nurture business for the future.

Prior to the pandemic emergency, CDC had embarked upon a major co-design process (with businesses and other stakeholders) to create a ten-year Cherwell Industrial Strategy (CIS) – this work had to be paused slightly whilst officers attended to the emergency response. This work is now due to resume, imminently, and the resultant strategy will be reframed in order to focus specifically upon helping to create a successful post-COVID-19 economy.”