

Paragraph 12.02 of Part 4 of the Rules of Procedure contained within the City Council's Constitution provides that a Member of the Council may submit a written question to any Cabinet Member.

This document informs Members of Council of written questions put to Cabinet Members and written replies thereto.

Council is recommended to RESOLVE to note the written questions submitted and corresponding responses.

No.	Question from/to	Question
1.	From Councillor Smith to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources	Former Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources, Councillor Fred Wood, in consultation with officers gave me an assurance that all the DHP grant would be used in its entirety. Could you tell me whether that grant was used in full and if not, why not?
Response		
<p>The Council had planned to spend the entire budget for DHP during 2014/15. The applications tend to come in phases; however, the anticipated volumes early in the year suggested we would spend the whole allocation. In fact out of a budget of £252,658 the Council gave £177,310 in direct DHP awards and £12,152 in homelessness support and deposits totalling £189.462.</p> <p>The Council received 899 applications for DHP and 785 were awarded, representing 87% of applications being successful. Applications that were declined were entirely done so on the basis of income available to the household. Where a customer stated they received income above their expenditure we would consider if they have included all reasonable expenditure, for example, had the customer included enough expenditure for utilities etc. If, however, the customer included all reasonable expenditure then we would decline the application.</p> <p>The basis for declining applications is to protect the fund to make it available for those customers in most need of support.</p> <p>We widely promote the DHP fund through various methods including: partner organisations, including the Welfare Rights Team within Civica, our website and working with landlords to ensure their tenants are aware of the support available.</p> <p>We are aware that other Gloucestershire districts spend against their allocation of DHP are in line with ours, we have details of two districts exact figures for comparison. Gloucester City has had greater success in supporting customers in need by awarding slightly higher percentage of the funding at 75% compared to Cheltenham at 61% and Forest of Dean at 70%. (Cheltenham DHP spent £116,000 out of a £189,000 budget and Forest of Dean spent £79,065 out of a £112,585 budget).</p> <p>Gloucester City Council's aim is to support customers in need and to prevent homelessness and we continue to work with partners to achieve this aim through the sensible allocation of the DHP funding available.</p>		

2.	From Councillor Haigh to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economy	Provide an update on the assets bought from SWRDA. Which have been sold and what has happened to any receipts? Which are on the market and how are they being marketed? What has happened to any income from the assets? What costs are associated with any of the assets? What is the status of any remaining assets which do not fall into any of the previous categories?
Response		
<p>The SWRDA assets that have been disposed of are as follows:- 1 & 2 Albion Cottages have been disposed of on long leases at a peppercorn rent at a premium of £300,000. The capital receipt has enabled the Council to fund its capital works programme across the SWRDA portfolio.</p> <p>The SWRDA assets we are actively disposing of are as follows:- 27-29 Commercial Road is long leasehold and is under offer subject to planning and the acquisition of the freehold interest from CRT. The Council are using Bruton Knowles to market the interest by private treaty but given the level of interest best and final offers were invited. Lower Ground Floor 23-25 Commercial Road – was under offer to let to a bar operator and Alder King are the Council’s agents. We are reconsidering this letting in the light of the larger disposal next door at 27-29 Commercial Road, to create a more comprehensive scheme. The Fleece (including the retail units fronting onto Westgate Street and the former Gloucester Academy of Music site) - this site is on the market with local agent Alder King by private treaty. It has been widely marketed but there are considerable obstacles and costs associated with its redevelopment. We are currently in discussions with two parties but given the complexity of the site progress is slow. A detailed building condition survey is in the process of being prepared. 18 Commercial Road – the unit requires a full refurbishment but is suitable for letting, we have agreed terms to let the unit subject to the potential occupier securing the necessary funding. This building does have issues with asbestos which makes its occupation challenging. Barbican Car Park (including BT car park) – This is the subject of joint working with the County Council to promote a combined site including the County Council owned Quayside House. Concept master planning and other pre disposal work are being undertaken and it is not appropriate to market the interest at this stage. GFirst funding has been secured to derisk the site. Officers are in the process of appointing consultants, funded through grant, to bring forward a technical solution to the delivery of “shovel ready” plots. Southgate Mooring Car park – we have improved the payment system at the car park. Long term it represents a redevelopment opportunity but it is a popular well used park and provides parking for the visitors to the Docks especially the disabled.</p> <p>We are not actively marketing any other former SWRDA properties. The other assets are under the management of the City Council and the income is being paid to the regeneration account. The Council incurs the normal costs associated with holding the ex SWRDA properties (maintenance, rates, insurance etc), where possible these are passed onto the occupiers through the lease provisions and service charges and as with the income they are accounted for separately. The SWRDA portfolio is now in a position where it generates a surplus for the Council. The surplus for 14/15 was £153k and this was placed into a reserve earmarked for regeneration purposes.</p>		

	<p>The remaining assets not mentioned above are as follows:-</p> <p>3 Albion Cottages – used by Gloucester Docks Estate Management Ltd The Weighbridge – let to Mode (a barbers). 14 Commercial Road – let to The British legion 16 Commercial Road – let to The Royal Navy Association. 23-25 Commercial Road – upper floors let to Davy Law. Docks Headlease – managed by the Gloucester Docks Estates Company Ltd under the supervision of the City Council</p>	
3.	<p>From Councillor Haigh to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Economy</p>	<p>Residents and businesses in Gloucester Docks usually pay a service charge, are there any exemptions from this charge and if so what is the reason for that exemption?</p>
<p>Response</p>		
<p>All of the residents and businesses that fall under the Docks Head Lease pay service charge in accordance with the lease terms without exemptions. The only areas within the head lease that do not fall into the service charge provisions (copy lease plan attached) is the barge arm multi-storey car park (red), which is used for residents and business occupiers in the docks who already pay service charge on their properties and Mariners Church (pink). 3 Albion Cottages is used by Docks Management and is also excluded.</p>		
4.	<p>From Councillor Haigh to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources</p>	<p>Please provide the figures for the number of occasions the City Council or its agents (eg Civica) have instructed Bailiffs to collect from a. Individuals and b. Businesses by month for the past 3 years.</p> <p>What percentage of properties in the City were affected?</p> <p>What advice is offered to debtors before bailiffs are instructed? Are repayment arrangements offered?</p> <p>What charges do the enforcement agencies levy?</p> <p>What is the debt recovery rate (total in money and as a percentage of debt)?</p>
<p>Response</p>		
<p>1. Please provide the figures for the number of occasions the City Council or its agents (eg Civica) have instructed Bailiffs to collect from a. Individuals and b. Businesses by month for the past 3 years.</p> <p>The table below show the numbers of referrals the Council has made for each service stated.</p> <p>Please note in relation to the referrals for benefits overpayments there are no powers of “taking control of goods” and therefore the agents are only acting as collection agents with no powers of recovery.</p>		

Enforcement Agent Referrals

		Council Tax	NDR	Benefit Overpayments	Total
2014/2015	April	4	0	65	69
	May	23	0	42	65
	June	197	0	35	232
	July	1553	0	63	1616
	August	5	68	53	126
	September	1097	70	27	1194
	October	548	16	62	626
	November	260	6	57	323
	December	288	8	0	296
	January	88	0	80	168
	February	358	2	133	493
	March	0	0	0	0
	Total	4421	170	617	5208

2013/2014	April	256	7	30	293
	May	111	5	52	168
	June	266	16	26	308
	July	121	18	64	203
	August	1142	51	32	1225
	September	442	18	26	486
	October	289	0	3	292
	November	178	5	153	336
	December	430	11	95	536
	January	160	8	99	267
	February	537	25	50	612
	March	58	0	53	111
	Total	3990	164	683	4837

2012/2013	April	48	0	52	100
	May	84	7	50	141
	June	458	80	37	575
	July	94	2	25	121
	August	767	53	35	855
	September	575	21	42	638
	October	266	5	27	298
	November	531	9	45	585
	December	448	0	29	477
	January	453	7	67	527
	February	451	33	34	518
	March	216	0	54	270
	Total	4391	217	497	5105

2. What percentage of properties in the City were affected?

The figures above relate to the number of debts passed to agencies. This could include several accounts for one debtor and therefore would overstate the number of properties affected.

There are currently 55,833 domestic properties and 4,003 commercial properties in

the city.

3. *What advice is offered to debtors before bailiffs are instructed? Are repayment arrangements offered?*

These are the steps and advice offered to customers before being referred to any enforcement agents:

1. Bill – a bill is sent for the financial year providing (initially) 10 monthly instalments from April to January. There are various options of method of payment. The reverse of the bill offers advice to the customer on what to do if they cannot pay, and gives them our contact details:

Please contact us immediately. We can discuss a payment arrangement with you. We can also give you advice on whether you can claim any help to reduce the amount of the bill, such as Council Tax Support or discounts etc. We can also put you in contact with an independent debt counsellor for advice on helping you sort out your finances.

If you don't contact us or pay on time, the following will happen:

** A reminder is sent asking for the outstanding instalments to be paid by a certain date. If they are not paid the balance for the year becomes due.*

** A summons is issued for a hearing in the local Magistrates court. Unless there is a good reason why payment hasn't been made before the hearing, the Magistrates will issue an order, known as a liability order. Costs will be added if a summons is sent.*

** If a liability order is granted, costs will be added to your bill. A form will be sent shortly after the hearing giving you the opportunity to make an offer of payment.*

** After a liability order is granted, we can collect amounts due by either enforcement agents, payments direct from your wages/salary, or deductions from your Income Support/Job Seekers Allowance/Pension Credit or Employment and Support Allowance.*

** Ultimately, non payment of council tax can lead to insolvency, application for a charging order or a prison sentence.*

The leaflet sent with the bill provides, details of appeals against bandings, discounts, exemptions and relief's, paying by direct debit, what to do if you cannot pay, and council tax support.

2. Reminder - up to 2 reminders can be sent. Each clearly provides dates of when and how much the customer needs to pay to avoid further action. The reverse of the notice advises them of the consequences of non-payment and contact points.
3. Final Reminder (if not combined with reminder) - Clearly provides dates of when and how much the customer needs to pay to avoid further action. The reverse of the notice advises them of the consequences of non-payment and contact points.
4. Summons from the Magistrates Court – the reverse of the summons offers the customer the following information:
 - Why the summons has been sent
 - Attendance at court
 - What happens at court
 - Defences against a liability order being issued
 - What the council has to prove to the court in order to obtain the liability order

- The contact details should the customer have any enquiries

In addition the following leaflet is sent, which advises the customer what will happen if they do not contact us and how we can help them. The advice agencies details are included on the leaflet attached as an appendix.

5. The Court Hearing – officers are in attendance on the day of the Court hearing to make arrangements with any customers who attend.
6. Prior to any cases being referred to an enforcement agent - on a bulk upload all cases are checked for previous benefit or wages details to set up attachments, and any individual cases will be reviewed by officers.

4. What charges do the enforcement agencies levy?

Since 6 April 2014 the law regarding distress changed dramatically. This was brought in by the Government to standardise recovery of all types of enforcement, to control aggressive bailiffs and to empower and incentivise the creditor and enforcement agent to collect with a minimum of doorstep confrontation.

“Distress” is now formally known as “Taking Control of Goods” and “Bailiffs” are now “Enforcement Agents”. The legislation also set down the costs which could be charged:

Compliance stage	£75.00
Enforcement stage	£235.00 plus 7.5% for any sum exceeding £1500
Sale and disposal stage	£110.00 plus 7.5% for any sum exceeding £1500

The compliance fee can be charged for each debt, but where the agent is recovering more than one debt can only charge one enforcement cost.

5. What is the debt recovery rate (total in money and as a percentage of debt)?

Having taken this to mean the full amount being collected. In 2014/15 the total debt (not including court costs) amounted to:

- Council Tax £52,715,000 collected £50,982,000 Percentage 97%
- Business Rates £53,111,000 collected £51,836,000 Percentage 98%

5.	From Councillor Hansdot to the Cabinet Member for Communities and Neighbourhoods	What is this Council doing about the plight of refugees? How are we helping these people and how many families are we going to welcome into the city with our support?
Response		
<p>On 11th June 2015, the Leadership Team met to discuss Gloucester City’s potential to assist Syrian refugees affected by the ongoing conflict. Having been briefed by officers about the Government’s Syrian Vulnerable Person’s Relocation Programme it was determined that the Council should seek to help. I requested that officers examine the requirements to make an application to the scheme initially to support five families with the potential to assist five more.</p> <p>Typically families comprise four to six people. The Relocation Programme provides funding for one year and refugees have five years to remain in the UK with full access to public funds. At the time of writing only four or five local authorities have</p>		

taken Syrian refugees under this Programme with a similar number well advanced to take families.

All Relocation Programme applications require that County Council and Health (for medical, social care and education purposes) are supportive. Following internal discussion, we wrote to and received positive responses from these organisations. Since then an implementation team has been established to take forward an application. This comprises Housing Strategy and Enabling officers, a private sector housing provider, the County Council, Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group and GARAS (Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers). GARAS will undertake the main resettlement and support roles as the agent for the City Council. Suitable contracts between various parties will be put in place.

The team is compiling a budget proposal to the Home Office, which is a first part of any application (following gaining political support and partner engagement). When the initial budget is agreed, the Home Office sends the authority details of the families it would like it to take. Health and Education then assess whether it can meet each families' particular needs (they could have high medical requirements for example) and determine their budgets, which are then submitted to the Home Office. Once these second set of costs are agreed by the Government, we have been told that refugee families will be sent to the recipient authority normally within six to eight weeks.

Since 7th September, plans are being considered to develop and submit a county-wide application, a decision on which is pending shortly. We also expect that the Government will ask local authorities to take a higher number of Syrian refugees. Therefore there might be a need to reconsider whether Gloucester City is able to accept more refugees (and whether current partner arrangements can continue in their present form).