

Budget Scrutiny 2023 - Public Questions

Leader

1. To what extent is the government target of 50% of all journeys in towns and cities being walked or cycled by 2030 reflected in the relative spend on cycling infrastructure on roads? Has any analysis been done on the spending that will be required to achieve this?

Response: Gear Change, published in 2020, sets out national government's national vision for 'half of all journeys in towns and cities being cycled or walked by 2030'. Within Gear Change, national government also acknowledges that realising its ambition will require significant funding to be made available to local authorities to enable forward planning, capacity and delivery.

Buckinghamshire Council has not yet analysed the spending that would be required to achieve this vision in Buckinghamshire. The Council is currently developing its Local Transport Plan 5 and a Buckinghamshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). The policies within these documents will shape the Council's future approach to walking and cycling investment.

The Council continues to monitor usage of existing walking and cycling routes at locations across Buckinghamshire. This data is analysed and progress towards increased numbers of people cycling is reported on quarterly as a Key Performance Indicator. However, currently the Council is unable to calculate the % of walking and cycling levels as a proportion of all journeys made.

Communities

2. Given that the community boards are intended to be a key plank in the delivery of the Council's Climate Change and Air Quality strategy, has the budget devoted to them delivered value for money in terms of measurable reduction of carbon emissions, or would it be better used on cross-county initiatives beyond the scope of the boards?

Response: The council's response to climate change runs through the organisation and will be addressed by many activities across the Council. Community Boards are part of the much wider response and given their focus on how they can improve the local community, whilst important, will only be able to have a limited impact on what is clearly a much bigger and wider challenge. It is therefore not possible to quantify carbon savings from the project's community boards have funded. Whilst addressing climate change requires many technical challenges to be overcome, there are also behavioural and engagement challenges as well. It is difficult to quantify the value of engaging communities in work to address climate change, any approach has to include enabling communities to act locally on climate change and broader environmental issues. So whilst we are unable to comment on a value for money comparison in terms of carbon saved, we are confident that funding local action is of great value and will play its part in helping address this challenge.

Transport

Potholes

3. The council needs to increase its spending on the roads. The roads have a lot of potholes in them. In general if the council doesn't get on and fix them then people will start to claim more compensation from the council for damage to their cars. That will cost more money from the budget than spending more fixing the roads. A specific road that needs resurfacing is Thame Road in Haddenham.

Response: The council has committed over £100m to invest in the road network over the next four years. We are committed to improving the network which includes reducing the number of potholes. We can confirm that Thame Road in Haddenham is scheduled for resurfacing as part of the 2023/24 improvement programme.

4. Please can you advise what is being done about the poor state of the roads around Steeple Claydon. Pot holes are so bad in places, that they are potential death traps. Any repairs done are inadequate and need repeating. We are in a very poor position in Steeple Claydon, being at the crossing point for HS2 and EWR, and the thousands of extra vehicles using these roads every week is making the situation worse.

Response: We are very aware of the increased number of potholes on the roads following the recent bad weather and we are working to address them through additional investment and the deployment of more resources. We work closely with the HS2 and EWR to monitor their works and to secure additional funding to mitigate the impact of their activities.

5. Value for money for gyratory traffic light shambles that disrupted traffic for months and has made congestion coming into and out of Aylesbury on A413 worse. Would money better have been spent on potholes or even resurfacing?

Response: The new system helps to reduce congestion and avoid potential build ups, keeping traffic moving as freely as possible. For example, on clear roads the system will minimise delays by changing lights more frequently and where there is congestion in a particular area, the lights can adjust to get more traffic away from that location. Over the last few weeks our transport team has been monitoring the site and fine tuning to ensure the new system is working as it should and we will make adjustments as necessary.

Sustainable Travel

6. Why was Council funding for the Walk Once A Week (WOW) incentive scheme for schools withdrawn at the end of summer term last year? What was the approximate take-up of the scheme in Bucks Schools last year? How are the council now supporting sustainable and healthy travel to and from schools when this scheme has been withdrawn?

Response: Due to changes in the external funding the Council receives from the Department for Transport, after the end of the Summer Term 2022, the WOW Travel

Tracker and Next Steps resources were no longer able to be provided directly to schools free of charge following the ending of central government funding to local councils for this provision.

However, the Council continues to support all the amazing work that Living Streets do to encourage active travel and to this end schools can still purchase WOW Travel Tracker directly from Living Streets using their Sports Premium allocation received directly from the Government, as WOW helps to engage pupils in regular physical activity.

We currently have 25 schools in Buckinghamshire who are registered with WOW, funding it using part of their Sports Premium allocation. The Council remains hopeful that future funding will be made available to continue WOW and remains in contact with the DfT.

The Council uses Modeshift STARS to help schools to develop and monitor School Travel Plans (STPs). It is an online system that helps schools to record the information they need to produce a nationally recognised STP. It is free for all our schools.

The aim of an STP is to reduce single occupancy car use on the school journey. Increasing sustainable travel helps to reduce congestion and pollution, as well as improving the health and fitness of children and young people and helps to teach young people the very important life skills they need to stay safe and healthy on their journey to and from school.

Modeshift STARS has an awards scheme that recognises schools that have demonstrated excellence in supporting cycling, walking and indeed all forms of sustainable transport. Buckinghamshire Council has recently topped a league of 59 Local Authorities who are members of the Modeshift STARS scheme – with the council having the highest percentage of schools with an STP. They are also ranked fourth highest in terms of the quality of the travel plans awarded.

We are keen to provide all the support we can and there are more resources available on our website www.schooltravelplanning.com, including some new STP banners which can be borrowed and displayed at schools. We also offer free Bikeability Cycle Training to all schools (subject to Government Funding) and a soon to be launched new online version of FootSteps training, the Council's practical pedestrian training scheme for children age 4-7 years old, which develops awareness of roads and traffic.

7. Given the huge pressure on budgets and the urgent need to step up investment in public transport and active travel in order to meet the council's targets for cutting carbon emissions across the county, have you considered introducing a workplace parking levy as has been done in Nottingham, for example, in order to fund this?

Response: Our approach to parking policy is considered within our Local Transport Plan 4, and as part of our Parking Guidance for New Developments, both available online via the Buckinghamshire Council website:

- Local Transport Plan 4: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/parking-roads-and-transport/our-local-transport-plan/>

- *Parking Guidance for New Developments:*
<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-policy/parking-guidance-for-new-developments/>

We have seen a reduction in people driving to and parking at work on a regular basis due to working-from-home policies introduced during the COVID pandemic. It is vital that we continue to boost economic growth in our town centres and discouraging people from driving to work (in the absence of alternative transport options) by implementing an additional levy on parking would potentially serve to counter this. Therefore, it is unlikely we would promote the introduction of a workplace parking levy in Buckinghamshire.

*In support of our target to reduce carbon emissions we have published our Electric Vehicle Action Plan which aims for 1000 publicly-accessible EV chargepoints across Buckinghamshire by 2027. This is available online at the following URL:
<https://buckinghamshire.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s43677/Appendix%204%20Electric%20Vehicle%20EV%20Action%20Plan.pdf>*

8. Given the acknowledgement that there will potentially be pressure on the fleet budget, has the council investigated where e-bikes or e-cargo bikes could be used as an alternative to traditional motor transport, given that they are both cheaper to purchase and cheaper to run?

Response: We have yet to fully explore options for decarbonising the Council's fleet using e-bikes or e-cargo bikes, although we are aware of their benefits through contact with the Energy Saving Trust. We are currently exploring options for introducing public e-bike hire schemes in Buckinghamshire (including E-Cargo Bikes).

This would be a corporate initiative to replace or be provided in addition to the workplace pool cars. However, many of vehicles within the fleet are school minibus or highways vans, which are much more difficult to convert to bikes. The fleet budget pressure is mostly related to the capital cost for new vehicles. The ongoing costs and depreciation are self-funded through internal leasing charges.

9. Is enough being invested in cycling infrastructure, given the significant holes in the network across the county and the fact the Bucks is still not building infrastructure that separates cyclists from both motor traffic and pedestrians, as outlined in the government's 'Gear Change' strategy?

Response: Gear Change, and associated Local Transport Note (1/20), provide guidance to local authorities on delivering high quality cycle infrastructure. This guidance sets out design principles that can be applied when designing cycle infrastructure in differing contexts. The Council considers this guidance, its application and proportionality, when designing cycling infrastructure in Buckinghamshire.

The Council is currently developing its Local Transport Plan 5 and a Buckinghamshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). The policies within these documents will shape the Council's future approach to walking and cycling investment. The

Buckinghamshire LCWIP will consider the existing network and identify high cycling usage potential corridors between settlements.

Like most Local Authorities, Buckinghamshire Council is heavily reliant on external funding sources to enable the delivery of cycling infrastructure. The Council proactively seeks funding grants from central Government; negotiates funding for active travel improvements from new development sites; and maximises opportunities through good partnership working with external organisations such as the cycling charity, Sustrans.

10. In considering the financial and budgetary aspects of the climate change strategy, I understand that currently the climate change calculations towards net zero by 2050 do not include the carbon emissions arising from the Council's financial arrangements. What is the rationale for not including this key aspect of the council's carbon calculations relevant to the net zero target? How can the council be aiming for net zero if these aspects are excluded? And what aspects of the financial arrangements of the Council would be relevant to such considerations and calculations e.g. pension fund investments; banking with Barclays; other capital projects?

See Response to Question 15.

Accessible Housing & Resources

11. I saw in the local news an article saying you were considering selling Walton St and moving staff from other offices. What will "savings" go on?

Response: The savings from office rationalisation are projected to be delivered by 2025/26. Rather than being ringfenced to be spent on any particular area, the savings will contribute £2.4m towards the Council's ability to deliver a balanced council budget, offsetting growth and budget pressures across multiple services in the Council.

12. Council tax money is used to finance council tax pensions, which continue to be invested in fossil fuels despite desperate warnings and calls to urgent action from the UN, the IPCC and world scientists regarding the existential threats from the climate and ecological emergency, and the very rapidly closing window before tipping points remove human capacity to prevent civilisational collapse. Emissions from fossil fuels are identified as being at the centre of these catastrophic processes and the world has to turn away from their usage. In light of this situation, what evidence does the council have that the council pension fund investments in fossil fuel are (a) secure from future volatility and able to offer long term viability for pension fund provision (b) will not require future council tax payers to plug gaps created in pension fund liabilities as a consequence (c) given the justification put forward that these investments provide opportunities for engagement with fossil fuel companies, what is the evidence that these investments have led to any significant change to the activities, business plans and future ambitions of fossil fuel companies.

Response to the Pension Fund

The Committee has a fiduciary duty to act in the best financial interests of the Fund's members and seek to obtain the best financial return that it can for members against a suitable degree of risk. This is a fundamental principle; however, the Fund is also mindful of its responsibilities as a long-term shareholder.

The Committee believes that environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) factors, including climate change, will have a material impact on investment risk and return outcomes, and that good stewardship can create and preserve value for companies and markets as a whole. The Committee recognises that long term sustainability issues present risks and opportunities that increasingly require explicit consideration when investing the Fund's assets.

The Committee does not consider a top-down approach to divestment to be an appropriate strategy for reducing climate and carbon risk and contributing towards reducing carbon emissions. Instead, the Committee believes that decarbonising the Fund's portfolio over time by reducing its exposure to carbon intensive companies and assets, and seeking to influence the behaviour of companies through engagement, will have a more beneficial impact.

In order to target net zero, the objective is to decarbonise investments by 2050, with a 50% carbon emission intensity reduction by 2030. The Buckinghamshire Pension Fund

reported 32% carbon efficiency in December 2021. At the end of December 2020 the Fund had 22% fewer carbon emissions than similar companies in the investable universe.

Brunel Pension Partnership is the local Government Pension scheme Pool which Buckinghamshire Council LGPS is part of. The link to Brunel's website summarising their approach to engagement and divestment is here: <https://www.brunelpensionpartnership.org/climate-change/our-approach-to-engagement-and-divestment/>. Brunel Pension Partnership produce an annual Carbon metrics report <https://www.brunelpensionpartnership.org/climate-change/carbon-metrics-report/> which sets out details of the overall carbon metrics and those of the underlying portfolios as at the last day of the calendar year.

13. Given the recent massive increase in energy prices, has the budget been revised in order to safeguard the council from price shocks by accelerating the implementation of energy efficiency measures such as insulation, LED lighting, and efficient heat pumps, as well as renewable generation?

Response: The energy budgets have been adjusted to reflect the rise in energy prices and we regularly update our forecast to reflect changes in the forward markets. The programme for energy efficiency measures continues though in some cases this is also being impacted by inflation increases particularly where costs of materials are affected by supply challenges. The Council's Estate's Strategy will also see a more efficient use of offices space and deliver reductions in energy consumption and carbon.

14. Are plans being considered to move the Council's bank account from Barclays, Europe's largest bank financier of fossil fuels?
- If so, when should we expect to see the move take place?
 - If not, why are Buckinghamshire residents who are deeply concerned about the climate emergency being forced to choose between withholding council tax and financing Barclays continuing investment in oil, gas and coal?

Response: The Council's banking contract with Barclays is purely for the provision of banking services and is for current account provision - there is no related investment activity.

As part of the Council's treasury management activity, any balances held in Barclays are pooled and invested elsewhere by the Council in line with the Treasury Management Strategy. [Council \(moderngov.co.uk\)](https://www.moderngov.co.uk)

At the time of entering into the contract with Barclays, an open OJEU process of procurement was followed, using central government's standard selection questionnaire, which at the time did not include zero carbon selection questions.

The Barclays contract started on 1st April 2021 and runs for a period of 5 years, at which point the banking contract will be reviewed. The terms of the contract allow for the contract to be terminated, with outstanding service charges remaining payable. There is

no early termination penalty, however there would be a significant cost in officer time in re-procuring this contract should it be terminated.

Finally, Buckinghamshire Council has a [Climate Change and Air Quality Strategy](#). This sets out what we will do, and how we will work with partners and residents to achieve our aims. We do not account for the carbon emissions of Barclays' operations as part of our emissions reporting. Barclays, along with the vast majority of other organisations, are committed to a [net zero strategy](#), that includes a commitment to reduce financed emissions and facilitate green financing.

Climate Change & Environment

15. In considering the financial and budgetary aspects of the climate change strategy, I understand that currently the climate change calculations towards net zero by 2050 do not include the carbon emissions arising from the Council's financial arrangements. What is the rationale for not including this key aspect of the council's carbon calculations relevant to the net zero target? How can the council be aiming for net zero if these aspects are excluded? And what aspects of the financial arrangements of the Council would be relevant to such considerations and calculations e.g. pension fund investments; banking with Barclays; other capital projects?

Response: It is correct that the Council's carbon emissions do not include those which arise from financial services which we procure. The Council reports on an 'operational control' boundary which means that activities which the council has direct operational control over are within scope and this does not cover procured financial services.

The operational control boundary represents the carbon emissions which the Council is both directly responsible for and consequently has the most control. Emissions outside of this scope are not reported by the council however in many cases these are reported separately by the supplier organisations. By way of example, Barclays report on their own carbon emissions through their corporate reporting, at a corporate level; the Council is not in receipt of data that will help to calculate what proportion of those indirect emissions relates to the business activity the Council generates through Barclays.

Other

16. Why do we pay one of the highest rates in the whole of the country and get the least back for it? Roads absolutely diabolical, no footpaths, no mains gas, little street lighting, schools oversubscribed because you take kids from other counties, never see a police officer, have to pay at extra at tips. I know this county has a good share of celebs but the majority of people living here are not dripping in gold. We pay a higher community tax that our friend living in the middle of Westminster.

Response: Local Government Finance is complex, there are various 'equalisation' mechanisms which alters the funding that individual Councils receive based on local characteristics from health inequalities to diversity. This means that different areas of the county (such as London) receive more central government funding per head of population. Buckinghamshire Council is funded predominately from local taxation (Council Tax and Business rates).

Buckinghamshire Council is responsible for providing services to 533,000 residents across a county that is nearly 2,000 sq kilometres in size, with a road network of more than 2,000 miles. The Council also provides social care for adults and children who need it, and that is set to cost nearly £350 million alone next year.

The budget contains £100 million investment in road improvements – this spend is badly needed especially as this year’s freezing winter has caused significant damage to our roads, plus we are seeing the HS2 and EWR HGV traffic significantly accelerate deterioration of many routes. The budget also dedicates nearly £143 million to schools improvements plus further investment in waste services, tackling homelessness and money towards protecting the environment and preventing flooding.

The council has had to make difficult choices when working out how to pay for these costs and services, especially when high inflation has had such an impact on our own costs. We cannot pass on a 10% plus rise to our residents, hence needing to absorb some of that cost rise ourselves, equating to an extra £63 million when also considering the rise in demand that we are also experiencing across the critical public services we provide.

It means the budget proposes a tax increase of 2.99% and – like most other councils with social care responsibilities - we are also proposing taking up the full 2% rise in the adult social care precept to meet these huge costs, meaning a total rise of 4.99%. This equates to £1.61 a week, for the average Band D home. We recognise this might be difficult for households already facing stressed budgets, but we also know it’s the only way to balance the budget and to allow us to put more money into the areas you point out that need further investment.

You can see a fuller explanation of the budget and the spending rationale by watching the [webcast of our full council meeting](#) (click on this link or go to the meetings calendar on the council’s website and refer to 22 February) and by looking at the latest news about the budget on the council’s website.