



# NORWICH City Council

## COUNCIL

21 April 2009

### Questions to Executive Members and Committee Chairs

#### Question 1

#### **Councillor Rosalind Wright to the Executive for Member Neighbourhood Development:-**

In view of the government's desire to have "participatory budgeting" functioning in every local authority by 2012, could the Executive member please indicate how the Executive intends to bring this into effect in Norwich?

#### **Councillor Linda Blakeway, Executive for Member Neighbourhood Development's reply:-**

'Participatory budgeting is one of the many tools available to the Council to widen the involvement of residents in the decision making process and is identified as such in the Executive's Neighbourhood Strategy.

Participatory Budgeting has been used by a number of local authorities across the country in a variety of different ways and as such there is no standard approach to what it is and how it is implemented. The approach most regularly used by local authorities has been participatory grant making where residents vote on where a grant fund is allocated.

The main features of participatory budgeting are that it:

- Usually involves meetings to discuss and agree priorities and a voting mechanism to "allocate" the budget
- The process can work at a neighbourhood, cross authority or thematic level e.g. young, older people
- Initial budget allocations are often modest to allow for the process to be tried and tested and for trust to be built
- Setting up participatory budgeting needs a significant investment of time and resource for it to be effective and those involved to be supported

Good examples of participatory budgeting ensure that:

- Everyone has the opportunity to become involved
- The process is representative and accessible
- There is good communication

- Participants are supported, trained, fully informed of the projects and the outcomes of decisions
- Councillors are involved
- There is an identified budget
- Staff and Councillors are trained
- Councils follow through with decisions made and it is a positive experience

The principles of Participatory Budgeting have been used once before by the Council during a regeneration programme in Catton Grove in 2004 where a range of projects were voted on by a steering group of residents.

For participatory budgeting to be fully effective the necessary foundations need to be place and community capacity building has taken place to make it truly representative. Over the past two years the Executive have been ensuring that these foundations are in place through the creation of the Community Engagement Team and the development of the Community Engagement Strategy and the Neighbourhood Strategy. The next stages will be to rebuild community confidence and re-engage with our neighbourhoods.

Recognising that each neighbourhood has differing needs and aspirations and will develop its own ways of engaging with the Council, it is likely that Participatory Budgeting will happen at different stages and in different ways across the City, therefore it would not be possible to give an exact timescale for when and how Participatory Budgeting will be in place although 2012 is a reasonable target to aim for.'

## **Question 2**

### **Councillor Antony Little to the Leader of the Council:-**

'Could the Executive Member tell us which Councillors hold which "Champion" positions, what they have achieved recently and what the Executive Member sees as the future for these posts.'

### **Councillor Steve Morphew, Leader of the Council's reply:-**

'Councillor Blower fulfils the role of Sports champion admirably. He has been very active in keeping in touch with sports organisations and developments in the city, and fed back into the council to inform decisions and policy development. Sport is a discretionary function for the council and Councillor Blower has been instrumental in such areas as policy around free swimming for example. Making use of his knowledge, profile on sport and range of contacts makes sense for the council and the city.

Councillor Morrey also takes on the role of Design and Historic Environment Champion in terms of promoting good design or heritage. This is an appointment made in response to calls by the Government, through Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and English Heritage, for all Council's to appoint Design and Historic Environment Champions.'

In the recent past we have had champion roles for children and older people. However, with the development of our activities in those areas and a unitary council these were included in the portfolios of members of the Executive. The delays in the unitary announcement have meant that both portfolio holders have developed on their existing expertise and also make significant contributions through different avenues on relevant topics.

I think the champion role is one that should be taken account of in the design of a new unitary council though at the moment I see no need to increase the number for this council. I am however very happy to listen to other views and suggestions and come to it with an open mind.'

### **Question 3**

#### **Councillor David Fairbairn to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-**

'Last summer I made enquiries about how the Council is bringing equality between the sexes by awarding women the title "freewoman of the City", in the same way that men are currently recognised. What progress has been made in bringing equality between the sexes, to the official recognition of the contributions that individuals have made?'

#### **Councillor Alan Waters, Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance's reply:-**

'This Council has for some time been lobbying the Government to change the rules to allow the Council to admit women as hereditary "Freemen". The legal constraints currently preventing the Council from admitting women a freemen, which are unfair and overdue for change, were detailed in my answer to a similar question in July 2008. There has been some progress and the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill currently before the House of Lords contains in clause 27 entitled 'Local Freedoms' an amendment to the Local Government Act 1972 enabling women to be admitted to borough freedoms where a resolution to do so is passed by the majority of the current Freemen. This approach differs from that in previous bills in giving the power to the relevant local authority but to the Freeman themselves but should the bill be enacted in this current form and should there be such a resolution then the long standing problem in Norwich may well be resolved.

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services has written to local MP's pointing out that support for this provision of the Bill when it comes to its passage through the House of Commons will be considerable benefit to those persons promoting the admission of women.

The admission of Freemen is an ancient hereditary right and differentiate significantly from the Honour of awarding the 'Freedom of the City' which we can grant to individuals and organisations and for which there is no gender barrier.'

#### **Question 4**

##### **Councillor Brian Watkins to the Leader of the Council:-**

'The latest announcement of job cuts at Norwich Union is yet another devastating blow to the local economy. At one time Norwich Union had a reputation for providing jobs aplenty for school leavers, but the succession of cutbacks over the past few years has raised understandable concerns over its future commitment to the city. It was only last summer that Norwich was earmarked as a growing 'centre of excellence' for the Aviva organisation, so this announcement is a betrayal of the assurances given at the time.

Would the Leader of the Council outline how he views the current situation at Norwich Union, and whether there is any meaningful role that the council can play in helping to protect local employment prospects within the company.'

##### **Councillor Steve Morpew, Leader of the Council's reply:-**

'Obviously I am very concerned about the impact of the announced job losses on local employees and their families and I will return to that shortly. However, the choice of language in the question – 'devastating blow', 'betrayal' – betray a devastating lack of comprehension about the importance of Aviva to the Norwich economy and lack of sensitivity of the work that goes into developing good relations with significant employers in the city and developing the business environment in which they can thrive in as a business. Aviva is a key part of our financial sector and to give the impression this council fails to understand the significant of the role Aviva plays as a flagship in that sector for the city, provider of more than 6000 jobs and direct injection of £150m into the city economy is a serious threat to our credibility and ability to attract and retain business for the city.

Fortunately this Labour administration has developed an excellent reputation working with businesses and attracting investment and we will continue to work closely with businesses of all shapes and sizes. We will continue to encourage Aviva and others to view Norwich as a business friendly place and develop an environment where they want to invest and provide a city where their employees are keen to live and work. We will continue to encourage growth here and whilst we will always regret job losses and seek to reduce them, we will not seek to target a major employer unjustly.

Regarding the role of Norwich Union in the local economy it is clearly a key major employer currently employing around 6,700 people (not including contract workers). Over the past 20 years this figure has fluctuated from 5,000 in 1994 to a peak of 8,000 in 2005.

Our understanding about the recent announcement is that the total job loss figures for Norwich is likely to be 480 in Norwich Union Life, split between 226 permanent employees and 254 contract workers mainly working in business change and IT.

This is the result of a 3 year series of major projects to simplify operations and improve operations and efficiency in the Life and Pensions division. As this work nears completion, the majority of the contract roles in business change and IT will

naturally come to an end. Norwich Union advises that they hope to minimise the impact of the reduction in permanent jobs by natural turnover and redeployment and to minimise the number of compulsory redundancies.

I am pleased that last year Norwich Union / Aviva announced that Norwich has been designated as one of its centres of excellence. This gives me confidence that Aviva will continue to invest in Norwich. I have been assured by them that Norwich will remain the head quarters for their General Insurance operations.

While these job losses are deeply regrettable, we have to recognise that, particularly in the current economic climate, businesses have to take steps to increase their efficiency to enable them to remain competitive. The Banking, Financial and Insurance Services sector (which includes business and professional services) is very important to Norwich. It accounts for 31% of employment in the city of Norwich. 29,957 people are employed across 1,860 businesses. The City Council needs to do all it can to assist these businesses to remain strong and competitive.

Norwich City Council will continue to work closely with Norwich Union to try to understand its business needs and plans and to ensure that the economic conditions in the city and wider region support its business needs. We are also both members of the Shaping Norfolk's Future Financial Industries Group, which works to support the development of the sector. Recent notable developments include the opening of City Colleges Financial Skills Academy in Norwich.

None of this is to deny or minimise the impact on those who are losing their jobs, whether that be from Aviva or any other employer. This council is not immune from the recession and we expect to see significant reductions in the numbers we employ in the coming year. You will be aware that the Councils Local Enterprise Growth initiative (LEGI) programme supports a range of initiatives which are supporting new and existing businesses and local people seeking work. For example, one of these is Norwich4Business, a fund initiated by Norwich Union and supported by LEGI and other partners, to assist local people who have been made redundant to start their own businesses in the Norwich area.

Our financial inclusion strategy is also designed to help those who need financial advice and assistance.

Councillor Watkins and others would do well to look at how he can support business and job growth, and support and encourage those needing help as a result of the recession, instead of launching ill considered attacks on important contributors to our economy.'

## **Question 5**

### **Councillor Judith Lubbock to the Leader of the Council:-**

'The decision to set up 2 advisory boards, the Corporate Improvement and Efficiency Board (CIEB) and the Housing Improvement Board were taken without any consultation with the Members of this Council.

The Boards contain Labour Executive members only, no opposition councillors. The Boards are also made up of people who are not from Norwich and have no stake in the City.

Whilst I accept that this council needs external expertise and advice to highlight good practice especially with regard to the current state of the council's housing services and the need to find £7 million savings next year, this has been done on a one off basis in the past without the need to set up such boards.

The Liberal Democrats have concerns about how the decision was taken to set up the Boards, Members having first read about it in the local press, their undemocratic nature, the use of external advisors who are not Norwich stakeholders, the life expectancy of them and their costs.

Can the Leader of the Council explain why this Council and the majority of its Members have been sidelined as they have and give some answers to the concerns I raise?'

**Councillor Steve Morpew, Leader of the Councils' reply:-**

'Councillor Lubbock seems to be confused on a number of fronts despite explanations to the Executive last week where she was in attendance. I am happy to clarify.

Firstly, she questions why the Executive has taken a decision on this matter "without any consultation with Members of the Council." Councillor Lubbock is fully aware that as part of the new decision making models within the Local Government Act 2000, and since this Council adopted the Leader and Executive Model in May 2002, our Council Constitution has made it clear that the Executive has responsibility to "exercise all the executive functions of the Council" (paragraph 7.7.1 of the Council's Constitution). So the Executive is actually carrying out a function required of it by council.

Although the Executive goes to great length to consult on many matter cross party, there is no requirement to do so, and indeed to do so would be completely impractical. In carrying out the responsibilities it has the Executive is calling upon extra help and assistance from others with expertise that will help us with the challenges we face. Whether they are Norwich stakeholders is of no consequence as it will be for the Executive to determine whether to accept their advice, and the Executive is accountable to council in the usual way and is preciousy guarding the rights of the Executive to exercise its functions and the right of council to hold the Executive to account.

In recognition of the need to engage with other members the Executive has adopted, as standard practice, an approach of allowing opposition groups to contribute to Executive discussions, which are also held in public. Indeed, Councillor Lubbock was present at Executive when the setting up of the 2 advisory boards was discussed, and took the opportunity to express her views. This administration has encouraged the development of the Scrutiny function and we will be discussing with the chair of Scrutiny how best to facilitate the scrutiny of this aspect of the Executives decisions and the developing transformation process.

The report to Executive makes it very clear that the board will have an advisory role only, and that Executive retains decision making authority. Any proposed changes to Council operations or policy will require formal member approval in the usual way. I am clear that this approach achieves a good balance of external advice and challenge, coupled with clear democratic accountability for final decisions and actions.

It is envisaged that the Council's Scrutiny Committee will have a role in monitoring both the role and operation of the advisory boards, and the content of the resulting transformation programmes as they develop. As Councillor Lubbock will know from her attendance at Executive, this was part of the discussion at Executive last week.

I do not wish to put a firm timescale on this, but we now know this council will continue until 2011, and the transformation programme and revised corporate plan that will be submitted in due course spans that timescale. If necessary we will ask both boards to continue over that period but if their work is concluded earlier we will scale them back or disband them.

Those serving on the boards are not costing the council anything. Resources for some of our transformation work will come from the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships and as the report to Executive makes clear, all this work will otherwise be done within existing resources.

I am concerned that Councillor Lubbock's question suggests that she does not fully appreciate the need for urgent and radical action to address the City Council's efficiency and improvement programme. The Executive is determined to act swiftly and effectively to tackle a number of issues, not least those arising from the economic downturn that has contributed to the budget issues we have to deal with, and is prepared to embrace external challenge and best practice ideas as part of that programme. It is disappointing to hear her criticise such a comprehensive approach which has been widely welcomed by stakeholders internally and externally. I hope having now had this further explanation she and her Liberal Democrat colleagues will throw their weight behind this programme and play a full part through the Scrutiny Committee towards meeting the challenges.'

## **Question 6**

### **Councillor Andrew Wiltshire to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-**

'I have been speaking to residents in my area about fly-tipping, particularly the area off Earham Green Lane in Earham, where the rubbish is difficult to collect because of the current state of the woodland there. I am currently exploring the possibility of a series of community action days to try to tackle this problem; would the council be prepared to support this in terms of offering the services of City Care or another contractor to collect what is removed from the woodland?'

**Councillor Julie Brociek-Coulton, Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care's reply:-**

'The council is keen to work with people to try and stop such incidents occurring and has actively supported other clean ups. For example 2 such clean ups were held in January and February when 12.5 tonnes of rubbish was removed from Bunkers Hill Woods.

We have recently obtained some external funding for Bunker's Hill Wood, which we have used to fund some re-planting, coppicing and further rubbish removal. We also hope to obtain funding for a community woodland project in 20 Acre Wood, which we are working on with a local school. I think all this demonstrates we are very keen to see improvements to these woodlands, and I would welcome any involvement from local members and the community.

You are welcome to contact Paul Holley our Natural Areas Officer or the Community Engagement Team who will work with you and advise over what can be done. People should be aware that fly-tipping can often be a danger to others, especially when needles, asbestos and the like are found. Any such clean-ups therefore need to be approached with caution.

The removal of fly-tipped rubbish can be costly with the council spending approximately £120,000 per year on the service. Any help to reduce this cost by stopping it in the first place would be welcomed. I would therefore urge people to report all incidents of fly-tipping to our customer contact team so that they can be recorded and investigated. The council will prosecute if enough evidence can be gathered. This also helps us to establish patterns of behaviour so that appropriate preventative measures can be taken. Over the last three months we have issued 6 fixed penalty notices and two formal cautions as a direct result of finding enough evidence to prosecute.'

**Question 7**

**Councillor Samir Jeraj to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-**

'Last month, the EDP carried an article about salaries of Chief Executive officers around the county. The journalist's research also revealed that the salaries for the Deputy Chief Executive and other Directors at Norwich City Council have increased from £65,291 - £74,618 at the end of 2006 to £84,865 - £94,658 at the end of 2008. What was the decision-making process for approving this increase and why was it decided to increase these salaries by this amount? '

**Councillor Alan Waters, Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance's reply:-**

'In March 2007 the Council agreed to give the Chief Executive delegated authority to agree the necessary expenditure to complete the City Councils unitary bid, and in September 2007 agreed a budget to continue this work. This work required a small team to be established and this was and is lead by the Director of Transformation.



When this post was established, under the delegated authority of the Chief Executive and in consultation with Group Leaders, advice was sought on a suitable grade for the post, and a new salary scale was established. The post of Deputy Chief was moved to the same salary scale to give parity needed for the two posts.

Councillor Jeraj may also be interested to know that when the post of Director of Regeneration and Development was created, in February 2008, Tribal were commissioned to advise on the overall changes needed in the management structure, and the salary level of the post. Their advice was that to be competitive in the market the Council should pay a higher salary than the grade of Directors posts at that time, but it was agreed to continue to use the pay scale already established.'

### **Question 8**

#### **Councillor Tom Dylan to the Executive Member for Sustainable City Development:-**

'I received a letter from the Head of Planning dated the 11th March 2009 informing me that my comments on a proposal (Reference: 07/00837/F) were presented to the Planning Committee on the 17 April 2008, and that planning permission was granted. Why did it take 11 months for this letter to be sent out, and is this a common occurrence? I can imagine that many residents would be annoyed if they received such a letter so long after the matter had been dealt with.'

#### **Councillor Brian Morrey, Executive Member for Sustainable City Development's reply:-**

'The application for 54 dwellings and offices at Northumberland St was reported to Planning Applications Committee on 17 April 2008 and was approved subject to the signing of a Section 106 agreement. This was not completed until March, 2009. The planning permission is not formally issued until the agreement has been signed and in this particular case therefore planning permission was granted on 11 March 2009. All those who have commented on an application are advised in writing when the decision is finally made and in this case it was 11 months after the report to Committee.

Unfortunately there have been a large number of applications that have been waiting the signing of legal agreements. This has been due to a number of factors including the apparent lack of urgency by solicitors in resolving matters, and, if the developer is not intending to develop quickly (due to the credit crunch) it is actually in their interests to delay signing to allow a longer period for implementation of the scheme. In addition, in some cases delay also related to staffing problems in the City Council at early stages in the processing of applications. Also, developers have attempted to re-negotiate terms because of the prevailing economic climate. The Planning Applications Committee recently agreed to refuse a number of longstanding applications if the legal agreements were not signed to put pressure on developers and their agents to resolve matters. In practice this was not necessary as there was good progress in all cases and 12 major decisions with legal agreements attached were issued in March.

In this particular case there were also complex issues to resolve involving adoption of land for open space and highways and the involvement of an adjoining landowner, all of which considerably added to the time taken to resolve all these matters.

In future, it is not expected that there will be such long delays in resolving agreements in the vast majority of cases. New arrangements have been put in place to streamline the legal processes involving earlier submission of information including land ownership information, the use of in-house solicitors, and, in many cases, the twinning of recommendations to Committee to approve subject to a legal agreement being implemented by the 13 week deadline and refusal if not. This is expected to make significant impact on headline performance figures during 2009-10.

However the substantive point raised by Councillor Dylan has been looked at by planning officers to ensure a better customer experience. They will look at revising procedures so that when applications with a legal agreement are approved by Planning Applications Committee, neighbours and others who have commented (including Councillors) will be advised in writing of the Committee's decision shortly thereafter – rather than when the planning permission is actually issued. They consider that this would be a more helpful response to the customer.'

#### **Question 9**

#### **Councillor Stephen Little to the Executive Member for Children and Young People:-**

'Will the refurbishment to the Jenny Lind Park be completed by the summer, and will there be alternative provision available to the children and young people in this part of the city while the work is taking place?'

#### **Councillor Susan Sands, Executive Member for Children and Young People's reply:-**

'The work to refurbish the Jenny Lind open space has reached an important milestone following an extensive consultation programme with local residents, schools and groups.

The views gathered have been used to develop a vision design which will now go through a final testing to make sure that as far as possible the many views expressed have been captured and incorporated.

This testing will take place during May and June so that a report can be presented to the Executive in July requesting approval of the final vision, the release of the final allocation of funds so that detailed designs can be finalised and the works to undertake the refurbishment can be procured.

It is anticipated that the works will commence and be completed during the winter months.

Wherever possible works to play areas and play space are not undertaken during school holidays so they do no impact on peak use. In only exceptional cases does this happen.'

Alternate play areas –

**Heigham Park, The Avenues** junior play area, toddler play area, situated in a park  
**Clarendon Steps, Bathurst Road** junior play area, toddler play area (small pocket play area only)

**Eagle Walk, Beaumont Place** junior play area, toddler play area, situated in a park  
**Chapelfield Gardens** junior and toddler play area, situated in a park

#### **Question 10**

**Councillor Bob Gledhill to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-**

'Can the Council guarantee to residents that the area of the cemetery around the crematorium will continue to be maintained as a wildlife area?'

**Councillor Julie Brociek-Coulton, Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-**

'The Head of Legal and Democratic Services is in the process of preparing a Management Plan for Earlham and Rosary Cemeteries. This plan will include details of future maintenance and take into account the views of families, local organisations, Councillors etc.

Scrutiny Committee have set up a Task and Finish Group to look at the wider issues relating to future burial provision in Norwich. One of the things they will look at will be the content of the Management Plan.

The Management Plan will be submitted to the Executive for approval and address this issue.'

#### **Question 11**

**Councillor Janet Bearman to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-**

'When I enquired back in March on behalf of a tenant as to why the 'urgent' (as defined by the surveyor) damp proofing to his flat was not going to be carried out within the following three weeks as promised, I was told that most repairs had been put on hold until after April. Why was this, are repairs now being carried out as normal and how much of a back-log has this caused?'

**Councillor Brenda Arthur, Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services' reply:-**

'Emergency repairs or those in the "one to five days" category have continued to be carried out uninterrupted and in accordance with the tenancy agreement.

However we do have financial constraints and as we approached the end of the financial year 2008/2009 it was necessary to tighten our controls in order to stay within the agreed council budget. Works which were in the "20 or 60 days" categories were re-assessed by one of our surveyors and if they were considered to be urgent then work was authorised and carried out at the earliest opportunity. In the case of the property referred to it was felt that this could wait until the new financial year and I am pleased to report that the work to overcome the condensation problem has now been completed.

There are currently 37 works orders of a similar nature which have been re-assessed and will be carried out within the next four weeks some of which will still be within the original target time.

We are always mindful of the impact of repairs on tenants. During the difficult last few weeks of the financial year officers have done their utmost to minimise disruption to our tenants.'

### **Question 12**

**Councillor Claire Stephenson to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-**

'What has the Council done to prepare for the changes being made to payment of many benefits administered by Jobcentre Plus (i.e. changes from payment in advance to payment in arrears and from weekly payment to fortnightly payment)?'

**Councillor Alan Waters, Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance's reply:-**

'The change by the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) in the timing of payment of their benefits does not affect the payment of Housing Benefits (HB) or Council Tax Benefits (CTB) because the date of payment of a DWP benefit does not affect the entitlement to HB and/or CTB.

Local Authorities have not received instructions from DWP for any changes in administration of HB or CTB.'

### **Question 13**

**Councillor Adrian Ramsay to the Executive Member for Sustainable City Development:-**

'I was concerned to read reports that the empty former council flats on the south side of Barrack Street have reached such a state that council officers have decided to clean up the graffiti and remove items dumped on the site and invoice the new private owners of the land. What action will the Council take to ensure that this problem does not re-occur? The problems also raise the question of why the flats have not yet been demolished given that it's now nearly three years since residents were asked to move out.'

**Councillor Brian Morrey, Executive Member for Sustainable City Development's reply:-**

'Action was taken by the Council to ensure the site was cleared of risks to public health. A court order was obtained from the Magistrates allowing the Council access to the site to remove such things as needles, combustible rubbish and the like. The Magistrate also directed that the City Council write to the owners telling them to secure the site against further public access. Should this action not be taken we will continue to act in order to protect the public whenever these hazards re-occur. The Council will continue to seek to recoup all necessary costs incurred.

A Statutory notice was served requiring the owners to restore, repair or demolish the site. Responses have been received from the owners which are currently being investigated to determine the next course of action the Council can take.

We should be in a better position to advise Councillor Ramsay shortly and I will ensure he gets a briefing as soon as we are clear on the options. The developers are very aware of our views on the way this has been handled by them. Whilst to some extent the delay in redevelopment can be blamed on the downturn there is no reason to my mind why the site should not have been cleared a long time ago and that would have prevented the anti social behaviour. Even so, there is absolutely no reason nor justification for allowing the site to be neglected as it has been and we will take whatever enforcement action we legally and practically can to deal with the situation and ensure the developers pick up the bill. The way they have behaved is disgraceful and gives developers a bad name.'

**Question 14**

**Councillor Howard Jago to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-**

'Does the council think that access arrangements could be improved in the Rates Hall by, for instance, providing an option of a lower counter?'

**Councillor Alan Waters, Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance's reply:-**

'The option of lowering a counter was considered at the time when the rates hall was refurbished and made into the contact centre. Unfortunately the costs were very high due to the need to install a new security screen. The decision was taken to incorporate lower counters into the new and refurbished interview rooms as a way of providing an alternative service.

The estimate cost from May 2006 was £33,900 to drop just one counter. The price was high because the security screens are linked to the three counter sections. It would mean that three security screens would need to be replaced to drop just one counter.'