



NORWICH
City Council

COUNCIL

9 June 2009

Questions to Executive Members and Committee Chairs

Question 1

Councillor Antony Little to the Executive Member for Community Safety and Community Cohesion:-

'The Bowthorpe Conservative Councillors have been told, anecdotally through the community, that the new CCTV in Bowthorpe and Earlham is often pointing in the wrong direction when incidents occur. I have tried, but failed, to find details on this. Could the Executive Member please tell us how many hours the cameras are monitored for and if they are moved to track incidents? Does the Executive Member have any details on the numbers of incidents which the CCTV have helped to deal with or any evidence that they are helping to cut crime in the areas? Local residents fought hard for this and need to know that the cameras are paying off!'

Councillor Bert Bremner, Executive Member for Community Safety and Community Cohesion's reply:-

'The cameras at Bowthorpe and Earlham have the capability of being moved manually from the control room, or on the basis of an automatic sweep. The latter process is in place in Earlham, but at Waldegrave, Bowthorpe the camera mounting is allowing noise to be heard in local residential property, and a new bracket to overcome this issue is on order.

Our control centre operates and is staffed on a 24/7 basis. All camera images are recorded, but as we have around 100 cameras operating at any one time, they are visually monitored on a rolling basis. The frequency of monitoring varies. For example, if an incident is occurring, then the operator will be working with the police and will be concentrating on the appropriate cameras during that time. Therefore each camera is not individually watched all the time, however when suspicious behaviour is noted, or when an incident is reported, then the camera will be pointed to the appropriate place and action taken appropriately.

There are many examples of operators picking up live incidents and helping direct the police to the area – a mugger in one of the parks was recently apprehended, potential drowning incidents averted and last week following a burglary the car used as a getaway vehicle was tracked through the city, and when this was swapped with another car the registration number of the new vehicle was taken and arrests made.

Convictions have been made possible by the use of previously recorded images, and that helps support the use of CCTV as a deterrent. However deployment of cameras is only ever part of the solution, and their use needs to be supported by other

measures agreed via for instance via the Norwich Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership to help solve local issues.'

Question 2

Councillor John Fisher to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'Could the Executive Member please tell me what spending - total spending, including all on-costs - has been already committed on the City Council's Unitary Bid, what is programmed to be spent in the next 2 years and if we are expecting actual spending to be over or under the programmed amount?'

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

'This is one of a number of questions I have had on this subject from the Conservative Group since Norwich City Council took the opportunity offered by the Government to bid for unitary status. One has to remember that Councillor Fisher is also a Broadland District Councillor and clearly hostile to Norwich becoming a unitary authority. Yet it is very interesting looking at last week's election results that the Conservative Norfolk Districts are in practice moving away from their status quo position with a number of senior Conservatives, for example, William Nunn, Leader of Breckland seeking seats on the County Council. So the debate is therefore about what form unitary local government is going to take in Norwich and Norfolk and not about the status quo. Given the alternative of an unwieldy and remote unitary county that would reduce Norwich to the status of a market town it is absolutely right that Norwich should use its resources to make its case to be a unitary authority representing the needs of residents in Greater Norwich.

Norwich City Council has spent approximately £1.295m on unitary status in the 3.5 year period between October 2005 and 31 March 2009. This covers all expenditure, including the submission of our original bid, supporting the work of the Boundary Committee for England and preparing for the transition to a unitary authority which would have a budget in the region of £300 million. These costs have been entirely funded from reserves and have not been taken from any service budgets.

Government guidance has suggested that best practice is for local councils affected by structural reviews to prepare early, and to be ready to respond quickly and thoroughly to the information needs of the boundary committee. Given that unitary status has long been a city council priority, elected members decided to formally commit resources to the project, including creating a small dedicated team, in order to provide focus, and ensure there would be no impact on frontline services to customers.

Councillor Fisher will be aware that the timetable for the Boundary Committee review has now been delayed, and they are not now expected to announce their recommendations until 17 July 2009. A final decision by Parliament is expected in November/December 2009.

In the light of this delay, the Council has reviewed the resourcing of the unitary project. As a result the small officer team which was working on unitary status has now been refocused to design and implement an efficiency and improvement programme for the current City Council. This transformation programme was agreed by Executive on 8 April 2009. There has therefore been very little expenditure on unitary status since April 2009, and this trend is expected to continue until a final decision is made later this year.

Once the final decision is made, whatever unitary model is selected for Norfolk, the City Council will need to commit resources to support the implementation programme, and ensure a safe transfer of services to the new structures. However, should the “doughnut” pattern be selected, the City Council will, of course, play the leading role in the design and implementation of the greater Norwich unitary Council, and so will need to resource the process (along with Broadland District Council, South Norfolk Council and Norfolk County Council which cover parts of the proposed new unitary council area). This will provide an opportunity to design a new council for the whole of the current city, and for the future as the city grows.

The expected costs of implementation of a greater Norwich unitary council have been set out in our unitary financial workbooks submitted to the Boundary Committee, and were also set out in the Council’s budget strategy which was agreed in February 2009. The amount estimated is £0.98m over the 2 year period (April 2009 – March 2011), and will cover both our unitary work, and our transformation programme.

One of the formal assessment criteria for successful bids is that implementation costs must be recouped by savings within 5 years. I am pleased to let Councillor Fisher know that our greater Norwich proposal will pay back its implementation costs within 4 years, and then will go on delivering significant efficiencies for all subsequent years.’

Question 3

Councillor Claire Stephenson to the Executive Member for Sustainable City Development:-

‘The property agent responsible for Earlham House has told the Nelson ward councillors that a survey will take place in July to ascertain the whereabouts of a collapsed drain which appears to be responsible for the subsidence and consequent flooding of the Earlham House car park, next to Earlham Road. The property manager has stated that the survey will ‘establish whether the responsibility lies with us or the council’. Can the Executive member tell me whether the city council is aware of this survey and what action will be taken, and over what timescale, if the subsidence proves to be the responsibility of a local council?’

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

‘The owner of Earlham House has been asked to improve the surface of the car parking area as it’s current condition makes it difficult to use, due to the uneven

surface and the problems associated with flooding, with a consequent detriment to local amenities. It is understood that, as part of this work, a drains conditions survey will be undertaken. Unless the cause of the problem lies with a sewer that has been adopted by the Council, it is unlikely that the Council would be liable for any associated repairs required. The car park is not within the adopted highway and appears to be privately owned land. It is therefore likely that the cost of and responsibility for the repairs that may be required would lie either with the owner of the land or, possibly, with Anglian Water if that Authority has adopted the sewer.'

Question 4

Councillor Adrian Holmes to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-

'I was interested to learn that the Association of Residential Letting Agents (ARLA) is setting up a licensing scheme and a Code of Practice for its own members. There have been moves to lobby the government to make such a scheme compulsory for private landlords and letting agents. Does the Executive have an opinion on whether this would be beneficial to the Council and the residents of Norwich?'

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

'The Government, in its recent response to the Rugg Review of the Private Rented Sector (PRS), recognised that the PRS has a key role to play in future housing strategy, and the need for a national register of private landlords and the need to regulate letting and managing agents was recommended as a way forward in achieving better standards of management and accommodation.

ARLA have long been asking for the regulation of letting and managing agents and have recently launched their own licensing scheme for letting agents. However, they are against the national register of private landlords as they feel that this 'light touch' approach is actually counter-productive. Many have suggested that the government should concentrate on incentivising and educating those in the private rented sector instead.

As a local authority, we strongly support landlords and letting agents that provide professional service in terms of property standards and management, and welcome any proposal that would help improve the standards within this sector and allow us to access 'good' properties for vulnerable clients. However, any new government initiatives will have to take into consideration the resource implications on schemes that deliver true benefits to the sector.

Norwich City Council, along with Broadland District Council, South Norfolk Council and the Eastern Landlords Association have already taken steps to help the sector improve and develop. We have recently re-launched the Accredited Landlord Scheme that offers incentives and professional development for landlords that abide by a set of codes and standards. The Scheme includes landlords' and tenants' guides, a website which helps to educate tenants and landlords (www.propertyinfopoint.co.uk), regular landlord events, worklessness officers that

access the sector for single homeless people, a private sector leasing scheme and a private sector projects officer who is responsible for developing and coordinating some of these projects. The Scheme is also the main point of contact between all stakeholders and professionals within the private rented sector.

We hope that what ever the government introduce to support the private rented sector will help us develop our already successful work.'

Question 5

Councillor Adrian Ramsay to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-

'The recent Audit Commission report into Landlord Services said of Neighbourhood Housing Surgeries that "Use of the surgeries varies and they can be closed without notice or signage, limiting the opportunity for customers to make contact with the Council.". In light of this criticism, are there any plans in place to improve arrangements for the surgeries?'

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

'Tracey Fordham, Acting Neighbourhood Services Manager, presented a report on neighbourhood surgeries to the last City Wide Board meeting. Board members were asked to consider whether a working party should look at neighbourhood surgeries in greater detail.

Discussion ensued in which Board members considered how to address the issue that in the majority of cases neighbourhood surgeries are poorly attended. It was agreed that in some cases this is due to a lack of publicity. There was consensus that rather than spend time sitting in an empty surgery officers' time could be put to better use. There was a view that Neighbourhood Housing Officers (NHOs) attending Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) meetings are a more constructive approach.

At the meeting I said that as each TRA is different and in order to make best use of resources it is reasonable to discontinue those surgeries where nobody attends but the surgeries should be continued where people do make good use of the surgeries. However clearly we have to respond to the needs of local communities and so it was agreed at the meeting that officers would consult with each TRA and NHO to agree the most appropriate way forward.

In this context NHOs are at present consulting with TRAs, tenants and Councillors. In some areas such as in Catton Grove the NHO has been conducting a surgery in the hour before the TRA meetings and this has been well attended and so, in agreement with tenants, will be continued.

Where there is no or poor attendance, following consultation, the surgeries may well close and work undertaken to consider how we can listen more effectively to our tenants. This will include looking at other ways of encouraging and enabling tenants

to make contact with us. For example in one part of the City we have changed the venue of the surgery to a local library. Officers are also suggesting that surgeries might be held just once a month.

Members will also be aware that we recently produced a leaflet to encourage more people to become involved with their TRAs so as to help them grow so that they become an even more effective way of enabling our tenants to make contact with us.

When the consultation is completed we will be widely advertising where and when surgeries are held. Although I would add that tenants can always use the neighbourhood offices to make NHOs aware of any pressing need.

In addition the new telephone number which comes into effect in August of this year will make it cheaper for many of our tenants to contact us. This change has been made in direct response to listening to what tenants have told us directly. ‘

Question 6

Councillor Peter Offord to the Leader of the Council:-

‘The Leader of the Council recently proposed a “Bite Back at the Crunch” programme to help individuals and the Council to cope with the recession. With this in mind, is there a scheme where individuals can either buy unwanted office furniture or other unwanted supplies from the Council at affordable prices?’

Councillor Steve Morphew, Leader of the Council’s reply:-

‘The Head of Asset and City Management has the authority to offer used office furniture and fittings for sale either to external groups or to staff.

Currently there is little or no external market for the resale of used office furniture or fittings.

Items that the Head of Asset & City Management considers the Council would have no further use for, and are deemed safe for continued use, can be purchased by staff. Sealed bids are invited via e-grapevine from time to time.’

Question 7

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

‘I am glad to see that the "Nelson Ward Labour Team" is agreeing with us that there is a need for "more regular and higher quality street cleaning and extra litter bins". So can we assume that the executive will now be following their colleagues' advice by addressing these issues?’

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

'Over the last year the council has significantly improved its performance in street cleansing. The most recent street cleansing survey show that the number of streets found to be dirty over the last year was 9% which compares very favourably with the previous year's score of 17%.

The issues of higher quality street cleansing are being addressed by working closely with our contractor. As mentioned we have significantly improved performance in keeping the streets clean over the last year. An action plan is being drawn up by officers to identify areas where further improvements can be made.

As part of the contract re-let for the cleansing services the frequencies of street sweeping will be looked at to ensure the appropriate level of services for each area is undertaken within the current spending limits.

All Members will be aware that the current financial climate means there is no new money to invest in higher levels of service delivery and the provision of more litter bins. However, through the actions outlined above I am confident we can continue to improve the services.'

Question 8

Councillor Janet Bearman to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-

'Bearing in mind the increasing numbers of Polish nationals now living in the City, which Council booklets and leaflets are easily available in the Polish language?'

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

'Currently, no booklets or leaflets are available to just pick up in any language other than English however we are able to provide booklets and leaflets in other languages as part of the partnership with the INTRAN service.

The INTRAN logo is shown on all publications and communications including the website and is a recognised symbol. Posters explaining that we can provide translation services are available at our customer facing receptions including Neighbourhood Offices

INTRAN enables us to provide interpretation and language facilities over a large range of languages with the top 4 languages in Norwich being Polish, Bengali, Portuguese and Lithuanian. On the back of our leaflets we are having the following phrase in our top 4 most requested languages:- "If you would like this information in another language or format such as large print audio cassette or Braille please phone 0844 980 3333".'

Question 9

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

'I am pleased to see that there is a walkabout planned for the Heathgate area on the 10th June to discuss how recycling facilities will be implemented there, and I know that there have been a small number of other such walkabouts already, for example at Paragon Place. However, residents in flats in and near the city centre are increasingly frustrated at not having recycling facilities, and I am concerned by how long this is taking. It was originally planned that the AWC scheme would be fully operational by this summer, and yet there are many areas (including Paragon Place) which still have no, or very scant, recycling facilities. When does the Council now envisage that this scheme will be fully rolled out to all areas, and will the Executive member give a commitment that they will do everything they can to ensure that this remains a top priority?'

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

'Members will be pleased to note that communal recycling bins for the collection of paper, card, cans, plastic and glass bottles were recently installed at 4 sites within Paragon Place. This was done in conjunction with the local West Pottergate TRA. More will follow shortly in the surrounding area including West Pottergate, Douro Place and Golding Place

For the majority of other sites, Executive gave approval for the Housing Communal Bin project to proceed on 22 April 2009, following the resolution of financial matters. This programme will ensure easily accessible recycling facilities are provided to the majority of our communal sites and the aims of the integrated Waste Management Strategy are met.

The sites have been graded according to priority taking into account such issues as the number of incidents of fly-tipping, problems with needles and the need to put in place safe collection practices. Priority 1 sites is estimated to take around 2 years to complete at a cost of approx £1.2m (there being 42 sites with many of these containing 7 or more compounds so there is somewhere in the region of 300 surrounds to construct). Contractors are engaged and working on proposals and initial indications are that it may be possible to shorten this timescale.

Once priority 1 sites are complete any money remaining can be used to deal with priority 'two' and then priority 'three' sites. It has been recognised that the current budget is only likely to achieve the priority 'one' sites and that options for funding the remaining sites will be investigated at a later date.

For clarity, priority 1 sites are those that present the largest greatest issues in terms of refuse collection and fly-tipping hence the need to address these sites first.

In addition to the above, trials are already underway to determine appropriate recycling collection methods from those areas outside of the Alternate Weekly

Collection (AWC) scheme and in particular in the city centre. These trials have incorporated different types of sacks and boxes to determine which method is preferred by the residents and the collection crews. Results of the trials will be reported back to the next waste working party in July. Following on from this report the scheme that is proved to be most appropriate for Norwich will be implemented.

For Councillor Dylan's information no timescale was ever agreed for AWC to be fully operational. It was envisaged that the roll out of the fourth stage would start this year and that is happening, but everyone on the Waste Working Party knew that communal areas would take longer to complete. He also knows that it is a top priority and will be complete as soon as physically possible barring any unforeseen circumstances that may crop up to hinder it.'

Question 10

Councillor Stephen Little to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-

'Last September, in response to a question I put to the Executive, I was assured that the need to start work on repairing structural concrete in Regina Road, Holls Lane and other properties across the city would be treated with the highest priority. At the time of writing, the unsightly and obtrusive supports have now been in place for roughly two years and no communication has been received by the affected residents of Regina Road and many other properties of this type on either the nature of the problem or when work to repair the concrete and remove the supports is due to take place. Would the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services look into the possibility of setting aside funds to speed up the planned programme of works on these flats and ensure that residents are shortly provided with a full update and would the council also consider some form of compensation for those worst affected by the continued presence of these supports?'

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

'I can assure you that this issue is being treated as a priority and much work has been done in terms of carrying out surveys, tests etc in order to identify the exact cause and extent of the problem on Regina Road and other similar properties. This work is now complete and various repair solutions are now under consideration to address the problem. Contractors are also engaged to cost the various solutions in order to ensure that the most cost effective solution is used.

Clearly this work takes time but we are now very close to being able to draft a final programme of work at which time we will ensure that residents and members are fully informed of the extent of the work and timescales.

The temporary supports were put in place purely as a precautionary measure to ensure there was absolutely no risk to residents and in the case of Regina Road. I can confirm that the detailed surveys have confirmed the extent and severity of the problem is not as bad as first thought.

I do not feel compensation for residents would be appropriate, however I will ensure that residents in Regina Road are contacted and supports adjusted or moved to cause less inconvenience.'

Question 11

Councillor David Fairbairn to the Chair of Regulatory Committee:-

'I have been struck by the fact that if I am overtaken at a roundabout, or someone drives too close behind, it is often a City of Norwich registered mini-cab. What power does the Council have to ensure mini cab drivers and operators stay within the legal speed limits, and follow good driving practice?'

Councillor Roy Blower, Chair of Regulatory Committee's reply:-

'The enforcement of speed limits and other road traffic matters are the responsibility of the police. However, if a private hire vehicle driver licensed by the city council receives a conviction for speeding, or any other motoring offence, they can be required to appear before the Regulatory Committee for members to consider the suspension or revocation of their licence.'

All new applicants for a private hire driver's licence are required to successfully complete the council's driving assessment. The assessment comprises a theory exam based on the Highway Code followed by a practical assessment of the applicant's driving skills. Existing licensed drivers may also be required by the Regulatory Committee to undertake the assessment as a condition of them retaining their licence.'

Question 12

Councillor Judith Lubbock to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-

'A well cared for, 3 bedroomed property in South Park Avenue area has been left un-lived in for over 6 months. Having asked the question through the Councillors system I was told there had been a dispute over the letting. Very little information was provided to help me understand the issue which is typical of the housing department.'

What I know is this, that a council house has not been lived in since the let was agreed on 18th November and probably some time before that date when it was vacated by its previous tenant. A home has been lost and rent has been lost and also confidence has been lost with neighbours and other tenants of the area who see this waste - something is wrong with the system which allows this to happen. This is just one incident and there are many more that I could quote. Councillors have a lot of information such as this and feel frustrated that they cannot influence improvements to the housing service.

What measures will be put in place so that councillors and tenants can have input to the new Housing Improvement Board to make the necessary improvements to the 'zero rated' service?'

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

'I have been informed that there have been no changes of tenancy in South Park Avenue last year or this year to date. If you can provide a specific address, a Neighbourhood Housing Officer will look into the case and report back to you on the current situation.

The council frequently receives questions about empty properties on our estates that turn out to be properties bought under the 'right to buy' which have subsequently been privately let out by the owner. This is often the case in the area you refer to as, being close to the university, right to buy purchased properties are let for student accommodation.

I will now cover the second part of your question about tenant and member involvement in the improvement work for the housing service and specifically tenant and member engagement with the Housing Improvement Board. The Housing Improvement Board is chaired by an independent person and has representatives from external organisations with housing and improvement expertise together with Executive member and tenant representatives. This board has no executive decision making responsibility and is designed to provide advice and challenge to the Council to assist the range of work being undertaken to improve the housing service.

The Council has set itself a challenging target to transform the housing service to a 2 star service over a two year period and to achieve this; a draft improvement plan has been prepared. On the 13th May this document was considered by the Executive who resolved to refer the plan to the scrutiny committee for their consideration. The plan is designed to achieve significant improvements in the housing service over the next two years with a number of tasks being completed between October 2009 and March 2010. The key purpose of the improvement plan is to improve the service and to ensure that the tenant and leaseholder are at the heart of the housing service. The plan details the various action points required to deliver the improvements and ensures that tenants will be directly engaged in shaping the future direction of the service. In addition the purpose of the Executive decision to engage scrutiny in this process is to ensure that all members of the council have the opportunity to participate in this work. As I have said on many occasions it is wrong to assume that the Housing Improvement Board is the main arena where discussions will take place on the transformation of the housing service - this is clearly not the case. Changes will be made within the service and will be directed and monitored through the Housing Improvement Plan.'

Question 13

Councillor Brian Watkins to the Leader of the Council:-

'Last July Councillor Morphew launched the council's new 0844 number saying 'We are committed to getting it right first time, every time'. Would he explain why the council failed in this goal and why proper research was not carried out into the cost of the 0844 number before the switch from the old numbers? Would he also inform

council of what the full cost (advertising, reprinting of literature, staff time etc) of changing telephone numbers twice in a year has been and where this money is coming from?’

Councillor Steve Morpew, Leader of the Council’s reply:-

‘Introducing the 0844 number was the means of making significant improvements to front line delivery of services to our customers. This was achieved by having the menu behind the single number and this has given us the tools to drastically improve the time it takes to handle a customer’s query, and has proved to greatly reduce the amount of customers that need to call us back for issues as they are dealt with at first point of contact. It has reduced our average waiting times from 1 minute 33 seconds (July 2008) to 51 seconds (April 2009).

At the time of the original change, both options of 08 and 03 were investigated. Although we fully expected to improve service delivery in the long term, the installation of a 03 number at the very beginning would have had a significant cost attached to it, as the council would be paying for every second that a customer was sat waiting in a queue, had to call us back, or had to be redirected. We also tried to lobby the telecom providers to include 0844 numbers in packages and not to make them premium rate calls.

Now that the new system has been implemented, and service delivery is greatly improved, we have re-evaluated our position, and reworked the costs. We also recognised from feedback that some of our customers were unhappy with the cost of their calls, mainly due to the telecoms companies’ reluctance to include 0844 numbers as part of their inclusive minute’s packages. In recognition of concerns raised, the telecoms providers not making changes, and the recession, we are reducing costs to our customers by introducing the 03 number. However, although they have now changed arrangements for 0845 numbers, they have not made changes for the 0844 numbers. The 03 numbers are included in any customers free minutes package, landline or mobile, and calls can also be dialled directly from outside the UK.

There are no telephony set up charges for changing from the 08 to the 03 number and both numbers will be running side by side initially, so this reduces the need to change leaflets etc. until they need replacing. Changes to signs for the one digit change together with associated publicity will be covered by existing budgets.’

Question 14

Councillor Rosalind Wright to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

‘In view of the recent political scandal that has rocked Westminster, will this council make a small step towards improving transparency by following the example of other local authorities and publishing online the members’ register of interests.’

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

'All councillors should be aware that the register of interests has always been available for public inspection at City Hall. If it is the collective will of all councillors for resources to be reallocated to make this information available on-line as well, we will of course, do so.'

Members will also be interested to know that it is a requirement of Government Regulations that details of allowances paid to all members in a financial year are published. This is usually done in the summer but the Leader of the Council has already asked that this be done as soon as possible. Now that the busy elections period is over this process is underway and allowances paid in the financial year 2008/9 will appear in the local paper next week. At that time it will also be placed on the Council's website.

The Members Allowances scheme, detailing all allowances payable, has, of course, always been available on the Council's website.'