



Cabinet

17:30 to 18:05

18 October 2023

Present: Councillors Stonard (chair), Jones (vice chair), Kendrick and Oliver

Also present: Councillor Galvin, Green group leader

Apologies: Councillors Giles and Hampton

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public questions/ petitions

There were no public questions.

3. Questions to cabinet members

Councillor Stonard, leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive development (the chair) said that two questions had been received from members of the council to cabinet members, for which notice had been given in accordance with the provisions of the council's constitution.

(Full details of the questions and responses were available on the council's website prior to the meeting and are appended to these minutes at Appendix A.)

Councillor Hoechner thanked Councillor Jones, the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety, for her response to question 1, regarding introduction of byelaws to tackle anti-social spitting, and confirmed that she did not have a supplementary question.

The chair said that as Councillor Catt was not present, his question, regarding temporary accommodation, would be noted together with the response from the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety.

The chair said that Councillor Hoechner had submitted an urgent question in accordance with the provisions of the council's constitution and that it had been accepted.

Councillor Hoechner then asked the question as follows:

“We have all been watching in horror the events unfolding in the Middle East.

I understand the council’s decision to illuminate City Hall in Israeli colours since 9 October was intended to show support for the people of Israel who have suffered terribly in the Hamas attack of 7 October. Councillor Stonard described the display of the Israeli flag as a politically neutral act of humanitarian support.

Whatever the intention, many Norwich residents, including members of the Palestinian community, have not experienced things this way. For them, the Israeli flag symbolises the war crimes committed under this flag in Gaza as we speak. Can the cabinet member please explain what the council will do to reassure residents that we condemn all acts of terror and that all innocent lives lost in this conflict, both Israeli and Palestinian, matter and deserve to be mourned?”

Councillor Stonard, leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development’s response was as follows:

“In answer to your question, Councillor Hoechner, at the start of the most recent violent conflicts in Israel and Palestine, the government wrote to local council leaders across the UK encouraging them to light up UK buildings and monuments in blue and white up to 8 pm on 10 October, to show support for the people of Israel.

But of course, following acts of violence since that time, I would like to make it abundantly clear that Norwich City Council utterly condemns all acts of terror, along with all innocent lives lost in this conflict, regardless of faith.

I would like to provide a summary of what Keir Starmer said in his earlier statement in the House of Commons on this matter, which I fully endorse:

“The murder of innocent men, women and children, hostage taking and unimaginably difficult stories and images emerging every hour. Families are grieving, across Israel and Gaza, and here in the UK. This is a terrifying and distressing time for everyone – Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim and Jew.

We are clear that Israel has the right to keep its people safe and bring hostages home. Israel’s defence must be conducted in accordance with international law.

We are also clear that the pain and suffering which has been unleashed is the responsibility of the terrorists of Hamas. Hamas are not the Palestinian people, and the Palestinian people are not Hamas.”

And I would also like to add that Norwich has always been an open and progressive city; one which has provided a welcoming and safe sanctuary to those who have needed it. We are proud to continue that tradition today, as we are equally proud of the diverse communities and different faiths which make up our wonderful city.

To conclude, I plan that we will have a minute's silence at the full council meeting in November as a mark of respect to all those who have lost their lives or been injured in this conflict, irrespective of their faith or nationality."

Councillor Hoechner thanked the leader of the council for the response.

4. Minutes

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2023, subject to correcting the spelling of Councillor Kendrick's name in the list of those present; and regarding item 2, Public questions/petitions, second paragraph, correcting the name of the person asking the question to Mr Cena.

5. Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Councillor Jones, deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety, thanked the scrutiny committee for its work on antisocial behaviour and the recommendations. She said that the antisocial behaviour (ASB) team had made exceptional progress to improve the service. The team had a good track record in sourcing funding, including the Safer Streets funding to improve community safety. She would be discussing the committee's recommendations with officers to see how best these could be progressed.

Councillor Jones replied to a question from Councillor Galvin and confirmed that the ASB team was adequately resourced and that this was kept under regular review. She said that she was not aware of any issues due to resourcing but, in her capacity as the cabinet member for housing and community safety, would be pleased to assist ward councillors who experienced this.

RESOLVED to receive the recommendations of the scrutiny committee.

6. An Update on Health, Safety and Compliance in Council Homes

Councillor Jones, deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety, presented the report. The council anticipated the imminent removal of the regulatory notice. Senior officers met monthly with the Regulator for Social Housing and an internal governance and assurance framework (as set out in paragraph 7) was in place, and included cabinet oversight. The tables (paragraph 24, pages 25 to 27) provided the position at the end of August and progress had continued. Members attention was drawn to the comments of the independent consultants, Campbell Tickell, reproduced in paragraphs 40 and 41 of the report. It was important that as the improvement project came to an end, there were measures in place to ensure continued compliance moving forward.

Councillor Kendrick, cabinet member for resources, said he had attended the Health, Safety and Compliance Board to oversee the General Fund Compliance Improvement Plan and praised the contribution made by Paul Cook, Interim Head of Building Safety and Compliance, and Mark Brown, Head of Property Services for their contribution to the quick turnaround. He also gave credit to Councillor Jones and former Councillor Harris for their contributions and congratulated all officers involved in this project.

During discussion, the Interim Head of Building Safety and Compliance assured Councillor Galvin of the arrangements to address the issues relating to the inconsistencies with data management and the use of NEC (as set out in paragraphs 5-8 to 5.11 of the consultant's report, on page 41 of the agenda papers). This was being addressed at senior level at Norwich and NEC. The most significant of these was the work to address inconsistencies in unique property reference numbers, and that there were not inbuilt forms to deal with risk assessments. He assured members that work was in progress to remedy this.

RESOLVED to note the report.

7. Disposal of Assets (Non-Housing) Acquired by the Revolving Fund

Councillor Stonard, leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development, presented the report. The Revolving Fund was good news as it allowed the council the acquisition of stalled sites and to sell them on for housing developments. The site was in Catton Grove ward which he represented and was north of Windmill Road. It had become vacant around 10 years ago when the Aldi Supermarket was developed and had become an eyesore. The council had acquired it under the Town Deal Revolving Fund and was now proposing to dispose of the freehold to bring it forward for development.

Councillor Kendrick said that, like his fellow Catton Grove ward councillors, he welcomed the proposal. One of the reasons for the housing crisis was that the private sector was not providing enough housing. He was proud of this council's work in building housing for social rent.

In reply to a question from Councillor Galvin, the Executive Director of Development and City Services explained that the reason for the recommendation to delegate authority was simply about speed so that sites could be purchased and placed on the market. The whole purpose of the fund was to bring forward development as quickly as possible. A report to cabinet would delay the process and take several weeks to make a decision.

The Head of Legal and Procurement assured members that appropriate governance systems were in place where officers made decisions, as set out in the council's constitution.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) delegate authority to the Executive Director of Development and City Services (in consultation with the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development) and the Section 151 Officer);
- (2) dispose of any subsequent sites acquired via the Revolving Fund ensuring the council's obligations to achieve best consideration for sites are fulfilled.

8. Managing Assets (Non Housing)

Councillor Kendrick, cabinet member for resources introduced the report. He presented the section of the report on the disposal of land adjacent to the River Yare in Cooper Road.

(Members concurred that they did not wish to discuss the exempt appendix, attached to the agenda papers at Item 11* (not for publication by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 2 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972).)

The Head of Property Services presented the section of the report relating to 4a and 4b Guildhall, Norwich and explained that it was proposed to market the properties jointly as it would provide better value for the council. This would provide flexibility that had not previously been permitted.

In reply to a question from Councillor Galvin, the Head of Property Services said that none of the trees on the site at Cooper Lane were subject to tree preservation orders and were in a poor state. One of the reasons that the adjacent owner wanted to take over the site was to manage the trees and proactively enhance biodiversity net gain.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) approve the disposal of assets outlined in this report; and,
- (2) delegate acceptance of the most advantageous offer for 4a and 4b Guildhall to the Executive Director of Development and City Services in consultation with the cabinet member for resources and the Section 151 Officer.

CHAIR

Appendix A

Questions to Cabinet Members from Members of the Council

Question 1

Councillor Hoechner to ask the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety the following question:

“A resident who has been affected by anti-social spitting near their house has been told by the police that this was an issue for the council to deal with, but the information provided by the council is that it doesn’t currently hold powers for dealing with anti-social spitting. Will the cabinet member commit to looking into possibilities for adopting a byelaw tackling anti-social spitting, as for example the London Borough of Enfield has done?”

Councillor Jones, the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety’s response:

“I agree that spitting in public – whether that be directed at a person or not – is wholly unpleasant and not something anyone would wish to witness. Spitting directed at a person is classed as assault, could and should be dealt with by the police. Following Covid, I believe we are far more conscious of this now. The issue of spitting not directed at a person is not a simple one to resolve and an initial scan of how other areas attempt to deal with it suggests there are a variety of ways that it may be tackled - each with its own complications. I will instruct council officers to investigate how other areas approach the issue with a particular focus on the legal issues, the practicality of enforcement and resource implications.”

Question 2

Councillor Catt to ask the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety the following question:

“While numbers of residents in temporary accommodation is lower than other comparative councils, the bill to the taxpayer for this service has increased year-on-year for five years (discounting an outlier in 2020-21 as a result of the ‘Everybody In’ initiative during the pandemic), representing a 41% increase from 2019 to 2023. Lots of councils are investing in innovative solutions in the long term to improve standards while reducing the cost of this critically important service. A good example of this is in altering allocation rules to allow tenants to retain priority banding when accepting a private-sector offer, which has been seen to reduce the need for use of BnB’s in large councils like Manchester. While the average time spent in temporary accommodation is currently at the legal limit and some families recently being moved out as far as Ipswich, will the cabinet member investigate solutions such as these?”

Councillor Jones, the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety's response:

“We continue to intensively manage our use of temporary accommodation and the number of homeless households in temporary accommodation remains consistently under target, a remarkable achievement for a city of our size with the pressures we face.

We are working hard to improve the availability of temporary accommodation in our area to reduce the disruption to homeless households caused by placements outside of our area. We are in regular communication with the Department of Levelling Up Homes and Communities and other councils with a similar profile to ourselves to discuss best practice and are always open to new ideas that will benefit our residents.”