



NORWICH
City Council

COUNCIL

25 January 2011

Questions to Cabinet Members and Committee Chairs

Question 1

Councillor Judith Lubbock to the cabinet member for wellbeing:-

Has Norwich City Council calculated the cost of contact with the public in its various forms? That is the costs of face to face, telephone, letter and website contact? If so could the portfolio holder explain the various costs?

Councillor Susan Sands, cabinet member for wellbeing's reply:-

All services of the council engage with the public and this will vary from telephone discussions, correspondence, on site meetings and home visits, email, and via the customer contact centre. It is not possible to provide a specific cost to all of this contact. However, national benchmark information suggest that face to face contact costs about £7.81 per contact, telephone contact costs public bodies £4 per call and on line contact can cost as little as 17p.

A number of assumptions have been made in the production of these national benchmark figures, but they indicate that the most cost effective way of dealing with public enquiries is electronically. This does not mean that the council will not still handle telephone, written and face to face enquiries, particularly for vulnerable members of the community, but it does indicate that there are ways to reduce the overall cost of customer contact without compromising quality of service.

At the moment just via the customer contact centre each year, there are over 136,000 face to face contacts (this includes city hall and the neighbourhood offices), around 301,000 phone calls that are answered by trained advisors and a further 26,000 automated telephone payments. Furthermore across the council over 2m letters and significantly more emails are sent each year, in addition to web traffic from those residents who use the council's website for day to day enquiries.

Clearly this is a high volume of customer contact and although it is not possible to provide the costs in the manner requested, as part of the council's cost reduction programme, and web refresh, considerable effort is being focussed on reducing the level of avoidable contact with the council, (ie where the public can resolve the matter for themselves rather than contact the city council) and where appropriate, to redirect customer contact to lower cost options, such as telephone contact or on line arrangements. It is envisaged that over time this approach will reduce our customer transaction costs.

Finally, if Councillor Lubbock, or any other member of the council would like to visit the customer contact centre, to experience the range of customer enquiries we

receive, and how these are dealt with, they should contact Tina Bailey, head of customer contact.

Question 2

Councillor David Fairbairn to cabinet member for environment:-

In my opinion, about half of all the gullies in Norwich are full up with earth and detritus, and are consequently unable to carry away the water in the gutters when it rains. Despite repeated requests for action on specific gullies, it has proved impossible to get them cleaned. How many gulley cleaning vehicles does the contractor have in operation in Norwich, and how many men are involved full time at this function?

Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for environment's reply:-

The council has had a new contractor carrying out gully cleaning since April 2010 and they are performing well. The work is carried out on behalf of the county council and we are using the same contractor.

In order to carry out the work efficiently, the contractor is generally working in a programmed manner rather than continually responding to reports of individual blockages. It costs more than twenty times as much to respond to individual reports as it does to carry out gully cleaning on a planned basis. A reactive approach service is simply not affordable on a widespread scale. However, gullies will be cleaned on an individual basis if there is an immediate risk to safety or property.

Our records show that of the 11,268 gullies cleared to date, 3446 have had to be cleared by digging rather than the usual suction method. This has slowed progress but even so, all the road gullies are planned to be cleared this year. Not only are some gullies full of silt, but they can also have debris such as needles, slabs, bottles, car batteries, pieces of wood or metal.

The current contractor operates one gully cleaning vehicle in Norwich, as did the previous contractor, and there are two staff involved full time. This level of resource is judged to be sufficient. As the contractor operates in the rest of the county there is back-up provision available should there, for example, be a vehicle break down or staff sickness.

Question 3

Councillor Graeme Gee to the cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services:-

The signage on the scaffolding which has been around the Guildhall for around 2 years states that work will be complete in autumn 2010, and the council website says "The work is expected to finish by November". Has the cabinet adopted a new definition of autumn or November of which we should be made aware?

Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services reply:-

The works to the Guildhall clock tower are more extensive than originally anticipated. The whole of the tower has had to be removed, stone by stone, due to expanding metal contained within the joints. All stone removal and proposals for rebuilding have had to be agreed with English Heritage as the work has progressed. Currently some of the damaged stonework is being repaired in the stonemason's yard. Once repairs are complete then works will commence to rebuild the tower using as much original stone as possible. Whilst the current anticipated completion date is the end of May 2011, given the uncertainties involved with this type of work, it is possible that this date may need to be revised.

Asset and city management apologise for the delay in updating the information board and website. Both will be updated within the next week.

Question 4

Councillor Peter Offord to the cabinet member for housing:-

Is the cabinet member for housing satisfied with the period of time given for notifying leaseholders of the large increases to service charges that have recently been levied?

Councillor Brenda Arthur, cabinet member for housing's reply:-

No I am not totally satisfied and am sorry that this year it took so long to undertake the work that was required to provide the information needed to calculate the increases in charges. However leaseholders were warned that there would be increases which would be larger than usual this year.

Two of the main recommendations from the Audit Commission's inspection in 2009, were that the council should:

1. "review the way that leaseholders are charged for services, ensuring that charges are accurate and timely", and
2. "take steps to maximise value for money by ensuring that all income is collected where possible".

The actual costs incurred by the council in delivering services are calculated at the end of the financial year, and these costs are used to produce service charge statements which are issued between approximately June to September each year. The council has an obligation to recover the leaseholder share of the costs incurred through the leaseholders' annual service charges.

In April 2010 we wrote to all leaseholders who pay their service charges by instalments to notify them that we anticipated an increase in their charges for period 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 owing to rises in the district heating fuel prices. As a result of these increased costs, we advised them that, when we came to produce their service charge statement around August 2010 there would be a shortfall, which would need to be paid.

For the period of 2010-2011 we advised leaseholders that we would be automatically increasing their monthly / quarterly payments from June 2010 to ensure that they more closely reflected the increases in the forthcoming period. We will carry out reconciliation during July 2011 which will compare the amount they have paid in instalments against the actual cost of the service provided.

For period 2009-2010 leaseholders also experienced an increase in their premises manager charges. This is because work started at the end of financial year 2009-2010 to review premises manager charges. We are now able to more accurately identify all the costs associated with providing a premises manager's service to our residents. Costs include employee overheads such as payroll, recruitment, human resources costs (personnel), finance, increased pension contributions and procurement services which we have not previously recharged. This has allowed us to make a more accurate apportionment of the 2009-2010 costs which has resulted in an increase in service charges, issued between June to September 2010, as previous recharges did not fully recover the full costs.

We are about to undertake a review of our premises managers' service to identify how we can ensure it provides value for money.

We recognise that in reaching a more accurate figure and following the Audit Commission recommendations the result has been a larger than usual rise. However where leaseholders find themselves in financial difficulty, we can offer interest free instalment terms.

Question 5

Councillor Stephen Little to the leader of the council:-

Several steep, well used and densely populated streets in Town Close are without a grit bin, despite satisfying the criteria for one. These include Newmarket Street, Rupert Street, Rutland Street and Chester Street. In recent icy conditions, the refuse lorry was unable to negotiate Rupert Street and several residents went without a collection as a result. As with other such requests, I have been told that it is not possible to provide a grit bin for any of these streets as it would mean moving them from elsewhere. What will the council do to resolve this unacceptable situation?

Councillor Steve Morphew, leader of the council's reply:-

This winter season Norwich has over 220 grit bins on the highway, a larger number than ever. During the severe winter weather in late November and December this facility proved essential for areas where they are located to treat both the carriageway and footways. Our new highway contractor, May Gurney, performed well in keeping the grit bins replenished when residents notified the council that their highway grit bin was running low or empty.

The initial cost of purchasing a grit bin and future replacement costs due to wear and tear or vandalism are met by Norwich City Council. This cost is funded from the same budget that is used to replace street furniture and, as members are aware, following the significant reduction in grant from central government, the council is

having to constrain expenditure across all service areas. The cost of the provision of the salt/sand mix that fills and refills the highway grit bins is met by Norfolk County Council as the highway authority. The county council are facing similar budget pressures, and as a consequence there is an approval process required for the provision of new bins. From the city council perspective it costs approximately £270 for the council to introduce a new grit bin, and the priority for council expenditure is on the maintenance and replacement of existing bins. Each year up to 15% of the grit bins need replacing.

In this context members may wish to note that in the winter of 2009 the council received 90 requests for new grit bins, during and following the severe winter weather in late November and December 2010, the city council received over 100 requests for new grit bins. In 2009/10 the council was only in a position to finance the provision of 6 new grit bins.

The city and county councils review the grit bin provision each summer to ensure the maximum benefit is achieved from the present stock and to consider if additional bins would be beneficial and can be funded.

Question 6

Councillor Samir Jeraj to the leader of the council:-

Residents on Hughenden Road have raised concerns regarding permit parking abuse, despite a sweep by council officers, this problem continues. Can committee investigate means by which this problem can be alleviated?

Councillor Steve Morpew, leader of the council's reply

Councillor Jeraj raised this issue with officers in the autumn and surveys were carried out to determine the extent of the problem in the area. Only one example of abuse was discovered; a new resident was using their visitor permit on their own vehicle. The resident was advised that visitor permits could not be used on the vehicles of people living in the street and they ceased using it.

Regular patrols have continued in the last 3 months and no further problems have been identified. If the residents or Councillor Jeraj could give officers details, including make, model and colour, of any vehicle that they believe has a wrongly displayed permit, or better still the permit serial number, then officers will carry out further investigations.

In more general terms whenever we receive reports that a permit is being abused civil enforcement officers will carry out regular checks in a street over a period of 2 to 3 weeks. If permit misuse is suspected the permit holder is written to, asking if there is an explanation for what has been observed and warning that if no satisfactory explanation is given, or the permit continues to be wrongly used, then the permit will be cancelled and any vehicle seen displaying that permit will be liable for a PCN (Penalty Charge Notice).

This system procedure has been in place for many years and for the most part appears to work well. At this point in time I can see no reason to amend that procedure.

Question 7

Councillor Steven Altman to the cabinet member for housing:-

The council's current policy dictates that residents whose homes are afflicted with mould infestation have to wait at least six weeks once they have returned a feedback form to the council before they receive a visit. Given the detrimental effects that mould infestations can have upon the health of residents, would the cabinet consider reducing the waiting period?

Councillor Brenda Arthur, cabinet member for housing's reply:-

When there is excessive moisture in a property and the temperature drops the water condenses on the coldest spot. This can be on windows but where there is double glazing this will be elsewhere for example on an outside wall.

Our current procedure has been adopted in an attempt to reduce the considerable cost of dealing with condensation, which is frequently the cause of mould forming. In a large percentage of situations a better understanding of what causes condensation and what actions can be taken by the tenant to reduce it results in a reduction of the mould.

When a report of mould is received tenants are sent an information leaflet outlining the steps to take to prevent condensation. This includes ensuring there is good ventilation and adequate heat. Also tenants are discouraged from creating undue water vapour for example by drying clothing on radiators. The leaflet has been approved by the Norwich Tenants' CityWide Board (CWB) and has received the 'Tenant Tick'. The CWB has given this procedure their full support and it has been recognised by regulators as an example of good practise in ensuring the council and the Housing Revenue Account achieves value for money.

A period of 6 weeks is the minimum period it takes for the excessive water vapour in a property to be reduced. After this if the problem persists we will undertake further investigation. Clearly if condensation, dampness or mould is caused by other factors then this can be addressed more effectively if the possibility of mould owing to condensation has been eliminated.

Question 8

Councillor Ash Haynes to the cabinet member for environment:-

Residents on Trafalgar Street have been informed that the lids on their 'tuff-tub' bins will not be replaced as they are having communal bins installed. Given that the communal bin programme has been delayed, would the Council reinstate bin lid replacements?

Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for environment's reply

A contract is due to be awarded for the next stage of the communal bin programme. It is the intention to bring the award of the contract to cabinet on 16 February. Following this, a programme will be drawn up which will see work commence on site in March. Trafalgar Street is one of the priority sites which will be dealt with first.

To avoid unnecessary expenditure, the council does not routinely replace lids since the bins come as a complete unit. Furthermore with the prospect of the communal bin facility being available in the near future at Trafalgar Street, it is not financially prudent to replace the bin lids for such a short period. As all members will appreciate, given the scale of reduced public expenditure in the next few years, it is extremely important that the council makes the best use of any resource it has. It is appreciated that these steps may lead to some short term inconvenience for residents, but a financially prudent approach seeks to avoid unnecessary expenditure.

Question 9

Councillor Lesley Grahame to the cabinet member for neighbourhood development:-

Is the cabinet still committed to using the £50k set aside in last year's budget for Participatory Budgeting?

Councillor Julie Westmacott, cabinet member for neighbourhood development's reply:-

Participatory budgeting is about empowering communities. The recommendations reported to cabinet by the member task and finish group to allocate the £40,000 approved by council (not £50,000 as in the question) identified clearly that participatory budgeting should be part of a mechanism to develop the capacity of communities and not simply to distribute grants. Cabinet endorsed this approach and cabinet members have additionally voiced that participatory budgeting should also be a developmental programme.

The task and finish group also identified that a significant amount of staff time was used implement the pilot programme earlier this year. The council's budget settlement and the on-going challenges to the council's finances means that cabinet cannot be certain on the future shape of the council and its ability to deliver a highly resource intensive programme, such as participatory budgeting.

The election in September delayed the reporting of the task and finish groups findings so that at this time the funding has not been spent and an effective community focussed programme could not be delivered in this financial year.

Given the scale of public sector spending reductions imposed by the government and the 'front loading' of savings requirement, the council has a significant gap in the revenue budget to fill. In the short term this can only be done by controlling spending carefully and holding back spending in the short term to enable a full

evaluation later in the year of the budget options available to the council. For this reason cabinet has agreed that as part of a financially prudent approach, the funding allocated for participatory budgeting will be put on hold until the council's financial picture is clearer.

The cabinet is committed to empowering residents and will continue to explore other sources of funds and alternative approaches that might be used to enable communities to become involved in spending decisions in their area and builds the capacity of residents at the same time.

Question 10

Councillor Adrian Ramsay to the leader of the council:-

When the council's budget for the current 2010/2011 financial year was proposed, councillors from different parties expressed grave concerns about proposed cuts to the economic development department at a time when the Council needed to be working to strengthen the local economy and provide more support for local businesses. As a result there was cross party agreement to the following amendment to the budget at the February full council meeting:

- £50,000 be allocated from the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant to be invested in economic development activity across the council.
- A cross party working group be set up to look at the most effective way to deliver the council's sustainable economic development activities.

I'm not aware of a cross party working group having been set up. How is this money being used?

Councillor Steve Morphew, leader of the council's reply:-

The way the question is phrased gives the impression that the two issues were directly linked in the council decision whereas actually they were two of four sections of that amendment. I also recall that no other parties apart from Labour voted for the amendment which does not seem to demonstrate a lot of enthusiasm for it from Green councillors

The £50,000 for local economic initiatives was included in the budget as a contingency item to address any issues arising from the restructure of the economic development service in March 2010. The council has adopted a financially prudent approach to expenditure and for a range of reasons it has not been necessary to call upon this contingency sum.

The government has introduced a range of measures, including a proposal to remove the Regional Development Agencies that have made significant changes to both the national and local business support landscape. Local business support organisations are not yet able to tell us what these changes will mean to the local business community in terms of what will be lost or what may be provided to fill the void.

In this context, and being mindful of the city council's very real need to contain expenditure, it has not been appropriate to commence any new economic initiatives. Given the scale of public sector spending reductions imposed by the government and the 'front loading' of savings requirement, the council has a significant gap in the revenue budget to fill. In the short term this can only be done by controlling spending carefully and holding back spending in the short term to enable a full evaluation later in the year of the budget options available to the council. However, it is recognised that Norwich City Council has a key role to play in supporting the resilience of the city economy through its economic development activities and also has a large influence locally as a landlord, employer and procurer of goods and services. The city council is a lead partner in the emerging New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership – this business-led LEP has been formed to stimulate and support local business growth and it is anticipated the council will invest in the LEP to secure benefit for local businesses.

Question 11

Councillor Adrian Holmes to the cabinet member for environment:-

Over the Christmas period collection of bins was brought forward by two days for Monday morning black bin collections from Monday 20 to Saturday 18 December and pushed back two days later (Monday 3 to Wednesday 5 January) for black bin collection. The result was that those customers who were sufficiently alert to be aware of the moving forward had a period extended by 4 days for rubbish to accumulate (including an extra weekend) over the heavy Christmas period. Why were the collections brought forward as opposed to the more logical approach of just delaying collection as necessary to accommodate holidays?

Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for environment's reply:-

Waste and recycling collection days always change over the Christmas period and the Council goes to great lengths to ensure that residents are aware of all such changes. Residents receive annual collection calendars which provide full details of their collection day changes over bank holiday periods, with a specific note advising them to check their calendar to ensure that they know which day their collection will occur on. Bank holiday collection arrangements can also be viewed on the council's website and in the *Citizen* magazine. However it is acknowledged that even though households have received a revised calendar showing collection dates, issues did arise with poor distribution of the *Citizen* magazine prior to Christmas, and, as a consequence, some residents may have been uncertain about their collection date. .

Christmas arrangements are reviewed and updated annually according to which days are designated as bank holidays. As in previous years, some collections were pulled-forward, which is standard practice in order to reduce the length of the post-Christmas catch-up operation as well as to make best use of the disposal facilities. This is in-line with our neighbouring councils.

Members will be aware that a number of local authorities experienced significant problems with their collection programmes over Christmas and the New Year. It is pleasing to report that, despite the inevitable difficulties with severe weather and the

Christmas arrangements, our contractor continued to operate efficiently throughout this period – a fact that was noted on national radio!

Question 12

Councillor Bob Gledhill to the cabinet member for environment:-

Several roads in Nelson ward have been suffering from flooding whenever there is heavy rain. The problem is particularly bad on Gladstone Street, where several residents have complained about water getting in their front gardens and them having to battle against it coming into the house. Council officers promised that drains throughout Nelson ward and other parts of west Norwich would be cleaned in the autumn. However, Nelson ward councillors have been advised that in many cases this did not take place as cars were parked on the road when the contractors went to do this cleaning. This is an obvious potential problem that should have been envisaged, and which Nelson councillors highlighted when we were in contact with council officers on the issue in the autumn. Clearly the drain cleaning needs to happen in a planned way where residents are asked to move their cars on a designated day for cleaning of their street. Will this lesson be learnt in future and when will the drain cleaning planned for last autumn take place?

Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for environment's reply:-

I agree that gully cleaning should ideally be carried out in the manner you suggest but for it to be successful, significant resources need to be committed. For example, legal notices need to be prepared and paid for, alternative parking arrangements considered, and work planned and coordinated with, say, the street sweeping contractor. It is likely that only one street in an area could be worked in on any one day due to pressure on parking spaces.

Officers are looking at the possibility of bringing forward such an approach in Gladstone Street and Beatrice Road before April.

However such factors require greater officer time to plan and coordinate and are difficult to resource under the present highway agency agreement. Therefore in renegotiating the agency agreement from 1 April, it has been agreed that additional staff resources may be used for such work in future.

Question 13

Councillor Claire Stephenson to the leader of the council:-

I understand and respect Councillor Morphew's decision to stand down as a councillor following five years of dedication and hard work as leader of the council, and nine years as leader of the Labour Group. However, his decision to remain leader of the council until after the election means that voters will not know who would be leader of the council if Labour were still the largest party after the election. Why has Councillor Morphew decided not to let his successor take over as leader of the Labour group before May?

Councillor Steve Morpew, leader of the council's reply:-

One of the most important roles of any leader is to plan for what happened when they step down. The leader is elected by council, not any group, and it is crucial to ensure that any transition is as smooth as possible. In politics that is frequently difficult but by announcing my intentions some months in advance it gives time to make arrangements. I don't think many in the city determine their votes on the basis of who leads their party in council. Councillor Stephenson has the advantage on me if she can predict the outcome of elections or the choice of her group when it comes to electing their leader. I tend to take neither the electorate nor my colleagues for granted, though I do share what seems to be her conclusion that Labour will maintain control of the council and may well strengthen our position in the May elections.

As such it is incumbent on me to ensure that colleagues who might aspire to succeed to the role of leader of the Labour group and leader of the council have time to familiarise themselves with all aspects of the role and arrange their lives to take account of the change and disruption to their lifestyle that will ensue. Of course the change of leader will also mean changes in other cabinet roles and the period between my announcement and May provides a learning opportunity. Ultimately the new Labour group formed after the elections in May will choose their leader and doubtless that person will be the Labour nominee. There are already exceptional candidates and I have every confidence that whoever takes over from me from Labour will be well prepared, well briefed and well able to handle the challenges.

As I am stepping down I will be less restricted by purdah restrictions than were I a candidate. Although I will be winding down in this role I will be able to help facilitate the transition.

Question 14

Councillor Ruth Makoff to the cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services:-

Following the extremely disappointing and unfair settlement from the government announced in December, I note that the administration is preparing proposed savings and cuts for the 2011/12 budget in addition to those it was already considering. What will be the process for consulting non-cabinet councillors before decisions are made? Will the cabinet consider the recommendations made by the December scrutiny committee meeting on the budget process?

Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services reply:-

Councillor Makoff is entirely correct in her analysis of the unfairness of the provisional settlement for Norwich. This should be of concern to all members of the council.

Given the scale of public sector spending reductions imposed by the government and the 'front loading' of savings requirement, the council has a significant gap in the revenue budget to fill. In the short term this can only be done by controlling

spending carefully and holding back spending in the short term to enable a full evaluation later in the year of the budget options available to the council.

This has been compounded by the timing of the government announcement on the grant settlement in late December which has left little or no time for consultation on how the council can meet the budget deficit.

Group leaders have been thoroughly briefed on the developing budget situation and have I am sure kept their own groups up to speed. In thinking through their own budget strategy, political groups can also avail themselves of private briefings from the Chief Executive /Deputy Chief Executive and the Head of Finance.

There is a Scrutiny meeting on the 10 February where scrutiny members will have the opportunity to consider the strategy for how this budget gap can be addressed. This will be followed by the cabinet meeting on the 16 February and the budget setting council on the 22 February. In preparation for these key meetings, all members have been invited to a confidential briefing on the 1 February to consider budget issues.

Finally, looking forward, the scale of budget reductions that have been imposed by central government, linked to the very strict controls over council tax, mean that the council will have to consider the priority for investment in the future. As part of this consideration there will be a need to engage with all members and Norwich residents early in the new financial year.

Question 15

Councillor Rupert Read to the leader of the council:-

In 1999 Mark Seddon wrote about the Leninist tendencies of the way New Labour was operating in Government, saying that the cabinet would often meet for only twenty minutes, with very little discussion and the Prime Minister and Chancellor directing almost all the big decision making between meetings. What steps is the cabinet taking to ensure good quality decision-making and to encourage members of the public to attend their meetings?

Councillor Steve Morphew, leader of the council's reply:-

Councillor Read really is scraping the barrel if he has to return to an article in *The Spectator* that is 12 years old. Mark Seddon was referring to such luminaries as John Reid and Alan Milburn - neither of whom to my recollections had expressed any interest in standing for Norwich City Council. Equally to the best of my knowledge, none of the present Labour group has communist party backgrounds. I do recall at least two former Labour councillors in Norwich from around 1999 who had been communist party members. They both later became identified with the Green Party so he may do well to watch put for the infiltration and controlling tactics of the early Soviet leaders that Mark Seddon's article was warning of.

Then again he might argue we all have things in or past we are trying to live down. As became clear from the pictures taken at the time a protester took his clothes off at a Charles Clarke's surgery, nobody is perfect.

Norwich City Council cabinet is one of the most open and inclusive. Visitors always remark at how much is debated and how much information is shared with opposition groups, Scrutiny and the media. The public do not generally show much interest in committee meetings so we must continue to look for ways of strengthening opportunities for influence that encourage more people to become involved. Cabinet remains an effective decision making body and getting the balance right is an important part of the governance of the city council. We will continue to build on that approach and take comfort from the implicit support given by Councillor Read.

Question 16

Councillor Rosalind Wright to the cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services:-

Would the cabinet member join me in welcoming the confirmation that the government has no intention of changing the law to allow councils to charge for routine FOI (Freedom of Information) requests? Would they also investigate whether Norwich could follow the example of Cambridge City Council by putting all requests and responses on the council's website and by making the FOI webpage as user-friendly and informative as possible?"

Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources, performance and shared services reply:-

Responding to FOI enquiries is very resource intensive for the council but we of course will continue to process them in accordance with our statutory duties regardless of our lack of ability to charge. However, members may be surprised at the scale of the challenge presented to the council in these times of constraint. Between 1 January and Friday 21 January 2011, when I drafted this response, the council received 38 FOIs.

Eight of these enquiries were from the media. Both the local and national media often, in effect, go on "fishing exercises" circulating requests for information from many different local authorities (sometimes even all LAs in the country!) to speculatively identify possible news copy.

Six of the FOIs were under the "what do they know" umbrella – FOIs are submitted through this organisation, protecting the identity of the person submitting the original enquiry and responses are then published on its website.

The high volume of FOIs has a significant impact on work programming, the ability to meet deadlines and of course budgeting. There is no limit to the number of FOIs a person/group can submit so it is very easy for one person/group to have a significant effect on the workload of the council, even one particular department.

I'm not sure if anyone has estimated the total cost to the public sector nationally, of dealing with FOIs, but it must run into £millions. This should be a matter of concern for all, not just those of us in the public sector facing huge cuts, but also all council tax payers. Sometimes simply making an enquiry, through emailing, phoning or writing to the council may get an answer sooner (and cheaper) than putting in a time consuming FOI.

The council has embraced the spirit of openness including publishing a very comprehensive Publications Scheme and website to provide information to the public. The web site and content is under review as part of a refresh exercise and I will be happy to ask that the suggestion of publishing FOI responses on the site be considered as part of that exercise.

Question 17

Councillor Evelyn Collishaw to the leader of the council:-

How much support we have given to small and medium sized enterprises (SME) business over the past year?

Councillor Steve Morpew leader of the council's reply:-

In addition to being a major owner of industrial premises, the council provides a range of support for small and medium sized enterprises. The following highlights the main activities and type of support provided.

Norwich City Council's economic strategy and key actions each year are driven by regular and wide ranging dialogue with the local business community. Through events such as the Lord Mayor's Business Receptions, partnerships with specialist sector groups and organisations such as the Norfolk Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Small Businesses the economic development team works to engage a wide range of local businesses in the development of economic strategy and activities to promote economic resilience and sustainable growth. A key example of this is the city council's continued role as a key stakeholder within the City Centre Partnership which is a highly effective example of what can be achieved through the collective efforts of a wide range of businesses with a vision for a thriving and resilient city.

Since April 2010, the final year of Norwich's LEGI funding, the Programme has supported 115 new and existing SMEs with free training, business advice, specialist marketing support and provision of business loans to those unable to access mainstream finance due to lack of collateral or poor credit history. The Norwich LEGI programme also supported the Global Enterprise Week activities in the Forum in November including a business breakfast providing advice about access to finance for green technology and service businesses and those seeking to improve their environmental impact.

Alongside this the economic development team provides a signposting and information service in partnership with local professional services and business support organisations to connect local SMEs with the right support and information to

tackle key issues and grow their businesses – the team have made more than 80 direct referrals to local business support to date this year.

The Public Protection section has provided food safety management courses for 36 businesses and workplace safety courses for 50 businesses. In September 2010 the National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme was launched with an open day which was attended by more than 100 businesses. The business merit scheme was launched with 4 'merits' promoting businesses that: provide healthier menu options; have good access for the disabled; source food locally; are breastfeeding friendly. Currently 87 food businesses have one or more merits.

Finally the planning service has provided free and paid-for pre-application advice to SMEs to facilitate their development aspirations.

Question 18

Councillor John Fisher to the cabinet member for housing:-

Could the cabinet member identify the number of lock up garages within the council's ownership or asset register? Of these number how many garages are currently empty?

Councillor Brenda Arthur, cabinet member for housing's reply:-

The council currently owns 4,358 garages of which 1,472 are empty garages.

Over the past two years we have carried out a comprehensive review of our garages. This has looked at demand for the garages, the condition the investment needs and the potential for development to increase the supply of much needed homes in the city.

Nine hundred and sixty five garages have been identified a potential development sites included in our Homes and Community Agency bid and following consultation with local residents work is progressing with Registered Social Landlord partners to begin building on some of these sites. Thirty four garages are currently under offer to applicants from our garage waiting list.

Two hundred and seventy one garages do not have any eligible applicants on our waiting list, so we plan to introduce a "choice based letting" approach to promote availability of these garages.

In addition we have 202 garages requiring repairs. These will be managed subject to future demand and budget constraints.

Following our review we now seek to maximise both use of and income from our garages by charging different prices according to where the garages are and whether the tenant lives in the city or not.

Question 19

Councillor Andrew Wiltshire to the cabinet member for environment:-

Residents in my ward have recently complained about a change from single decker to double decker buses, which overlook their gardens when they stop nearby. Could the cabinet member explain whether the bus operator would need permission to do this or whether they are able to determine this as part of their contract?

Councillor Victoria Macdonald, cabinet member for environment's reply:-

Neither the city nor the county council has control over whether a bus operator operates a double deck or single deck vehicle except where run under contract (by the county council). The majority of bus services in Norwich, including those in Bowthorpe, are operated commercially and decisions about the nature of the vehicle used are therefore a matter for the operator. My suggestion would be for Councillor Wiltshire, as a ward member, to contact First customer relations department.

Question 20

Councillor Steve Morphew to the cabinet member for neighbourhoods (south and west):-

Would the cabinet member explain how the city council and police work together to ensure those who attend public events for celebration or demonstration are kept safe whilst continuing to exercise their historic rights of dissent and enjoyment in our city?

Councillor Bert Bremner, cabinet member for neighbourhoods (south and west) reply:-

Norfolk Constabulary often provide the lead for the management of demonstrations, the liaison with the organisers of such demonstrations, and for sharing information with interested parties, including the City Council. The police have a clear role if there are concerns or a likelihood of public disorder

When the police are aware of demonstrations they will brief relevant partner organisations including the Council so that where resources are required before, during or after a demonstration e.g. additional street cleaning after the event, these can be arranged or programmed. The Council, is the owner of public open spaces, and, is responsible for the management of the Highway. These responsibilities, together with extensive experience in managing major public events means that the Police will work very closely with the city council on the arrangements for any major demonstration in the City. For example, this liaison can include the use of open spaces for demonstrators to congregate, the routes for any procession and dispersal points. Roles, responsibilities and information sharing are therefore key to a successfully managed event and this information sharing is two way.

Where the council is involved, a risk assessment approach will be used and our response will reflect this assessment.

The police have very limited powers to prevent or put in place controls over protests and they will not always deploy officers when protests are planned as their attention is dependent upon a likelihood of crime and disorder.

In many cases the organisation that is being protested against is expected to facilitate the event in conjunction with the protest group.

The police and partners will keep this matter under regular review and will liaise on how to improve the approach to management of demonstrations.

Question 21

Councillor Jenny Lay to the leader of the council:-

Would the portfolio holder explain the impact of government cuts on the council's ability to support people looking to start businesses?

Councillor Steve Morpew, leader of the council's reply:-

Since 2007/8 the Norwich LEGI funding has given a significant boost to business start-up support in the City – the local authorities fortunate enough to secure LEGI funding were asked to put together ten year programmes to make a real change in local attitudes and access to enterprise. As members will know the government-funded Norwich LEGI programme has had an in-year cut for 2010-11 and will cease completely in March 2011; we are actually seeing the most significant cuts and structural change to government funded business start-up support in the last 30 years.

This will mean considerably less local start up provision than Norwich has been used to in recent years however as a part of the LEGI Programme's legacy, the short to medium term future for the Norwich Enterprise Centre is secure and we are working with NWES, the business support agency who manage the centre on our behalf, to maintain the offer of free business advice for start-ups. The arrangements we have put in place for the medium-term operations of the Enterprise Centre mean that value of the enterprise centre accommodation may be able to help draw in match-funding to deliver services.

The LEGI programme has also made a long term investment into Foundation East which will continue to offer loan finance to those new and existing businesses that struggle to source mainstream funding via banks – either because of poor credit history or the tightening of bank lending.

The council is working with other local business support providers to assist them to access funding from alternative sources to continue delivery beyond March 2011 and to develop their capacity to generate more income.

Alongside the loss of LEGI funding, the most significant and noticeable impact of the government's spending decisions locally will be the loss of the Business Link regional service, its local advisors and free business start-up and development

workshops. From November 2011 the Business Link offer will consist of a national website and call centre. The Business Link national website will be enhanced but anybody working in the field of business start-up support would contend that web-based resources are not enough.

There is still a good deal of uncertainty at this stage as to what, if any, additional central government funded or directed provision will be in place and how it might operate at a local level. It is safe to say it will be limited.

The government are increasingly expecting those looking to start their own business to use web-based resources or purchase business support services from the private sector. For those with limited financial resources or those who may need extra assistance the government are increasingly expecting this support to be provided free-of-charge by volunteers from the local business community – again it is not clear at this stage how this service will be established or maintained or indeed how many members of the local business community will be able to make a regular commitment to give their time for free in support of others.

Many organisations have expressed concern about the current national proposals because of the practicality of matching up people with mentors via a web-based service and most importantly the lack of resource for training, coordination and quality assurance of these volunteer mentors. It is not enough to link up a mentor with a potential business and hope for the best. There are issues of safeguarding the interests of both parties to take into account.

Mentoring does have real benefits but requires co-ordination and resource, the Council is working with several local initiatives that recruit and coordinate volunteer mentors to see how these initiatives may achieve a degree of sustainability in the current financial climate.

In addition the economic development service continues to provide basic information and signposting to individuals enquiring about starting a business and to ensure that whatever services are available are effectively promoted into our local communities. Economic development will also continue to lobby and engage with the emerging policy agenda and the development of local business support through the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership. However as with many of the government announcements there is a lack of clarity over the role that Local Enterprise Partnerships will play in providing direct support for the creation of new business enterprises.