



NORWICH
City Council

COUNCIL

21 October 2008

Questions to Executive Members and Committee Chairs

Question 1

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

'Given the current global economic situation, could more be done to ensure that Norwich City Council's investments and reserves are safe?'

Councillor Mary Cannell to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'Could the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance explain what steps have been taken to protect the Council's financial position during the current banking crisis? '

Councillor Joyce Divers to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'In view of the current economic crisis and its impact on councils and their investments, would the Executive Member list where the Council has investments and does he feel it would be wise to review these investments?'

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

'Can I thank colleagues for raising this issue in Full Council It allows me to reassure Councillors, and the citizens of Norwich that the City Council does not have any investments in Icelandic Banks. At any one time we will have between £30 and £50 million pounds invested and the interest received makes a contribution to our revenue budgets. In the last financial year, for example, the Council received £3,100,000 from such investments.

The Council is prudent in its investment strategy and spreads its investments across top rated institutions to spread the risk. Our investments are currently spread across 24 different financial institutions and we normally do not invest more than 5% of our funds in any one financial institution. Where the Council invests changes constantly but I can confirm that at present the investments are all in English Financial Institutions.'

Question 2

Councillor Rupert Read to the Executive Member for Sustainable City Development:-

'Research commissioned by Transport for London in 2003 showed that following cycling training most people cycle more confidently, more regularly and over greater distances. Does the Council have any plans to promote cycling by supporting cycling training?'

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

'I support compulsory training for cyclists for the reasons you mention and also to try and get all cyclists to understand that there is a highway code that has to be obeyed by all road users including themselves.

The lead on this type of training would normally fall on a highway/education authority which locally is Norfolk County Council. At present the County Council has a wide ranging training programme for children aimed at years 4 and 6. They estimate that this year some 5000 Year 6 children will be trained with on-road skills and at this level the amount of training available is comfortably meeting demand from schools.

The County Council do not have an adult cycle training programme. This is simply because there is no evidence of demand. Where cyclists do ask for help it is usually either to do with mechanical issues or route guidance. The latter is provided in a number of ways and, in particular, through the development of company travel plans. In addition the City and County Councils have jointly published a map with recommended cycle routes in the City to assist cyclists in finding a route.

I would expect a Unitary Norwich Council to develop a plan for cycling training and to publicise it to try and get every cyclist to participate.'

Question 3

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

'When will the Council advertise to the public the new planning legislation regarding the paving of front gardens?'

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

'Officers have prepared an article on the national changes to Permitted Development Rights in relation to paving over gardens to go in the November issue of Citizen Magazine. In addition, an informal policy to guide local implementation of the policy change has been prepared and will be taken to Executive for consideration on 12 November 2008.'

Question 4

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

'The Council has recently been delivering black wheelie bins for residual waste to households in phase three of the alternate weekly collection scheme and it will soon be delivering blue wheelie bins for recycling to the same households. Residents and Green Councillors have been surprised that for houses divided into flats one black bin has been provided per flat without the residents having been asked whether they want that many. On many roads in the city this has resulted in front gardens being full of wheelie bins and residents are concerned that this problem will double when the blue bins are provided. Why haven't residents of houses of multiple occupation been consulted on how many bins they would like and can we be assured that they will be consulted before the blue bins are distributed?'

Councillor Brian Morrey's reply in the absence of Councillor Julie Brociek Coulton, Executive Member for Customer Care and Residents Services:-

'It is not always possible to contact every resident within HMO's and flats and experience shows that they are very unlikely to all agree on the same solution for waste and recycling issues. Solutions have to be devised according to the capacity of storage required for the number of dwellings. This capacity can be provided through various sizes of bins and can result in individual standard 240 litre bins per dwelling, larger bulk bins or a combination of both.

Each location will require a solution based on experience of other similar situations, availability of suitable storage space and appropriate access for collection vehicles.

It is not always the case that such properties are given one bin per flat/bedsit though this is a workable and suitable solution in some cases. Officers have experience of properties where original solutions are later amended and developed over time – there are still changes ongoing from stages 1 and 2 – but also have experience of areas where residents are very keen on having their own bin rather than being asked to use shared facilities. There are also occasions where errors in data or in delivery have resulted in too many bins being delivered to some properties. These issues are resolved as soon as possible when they are brought to the attention of officers.

I have asked Officers to draw up a report on the situation with some suggested ways forward that the Waste Management Working Party can then consider and make recommendations to the Executive.'

Question 5

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

'Some items, such as radiators, can no longer be collected by the bulky item collection service. What advice are residents being given regarding what to do with these items?'

Councillor Brian Morrey's reply in the absence of Councillor Julie Brociek Coulton, Executive Member for Customer Care and Residents Services:-

'Residents are encouraged to think about re-use in the first instance – can the item you are disposing of be used by someone else? If so, a local charity such as the Norfolk Homemakers Project or the Freecycle service may be an option.

The bulky items service provided by the Council is for the collection of up to 3 items and for a charge of £15. The collection is available for items such as furniture and mattresses – things that you would normally take with you when moving house. It does not include items such as radiators, building waste or garden waste. For fridges and freezers the City Council provides a free collection service from domestic households.

Where items are not suitable for the bulky items service residents are advised that they should take them to the household waste recycling centre on Swanton Road. Alternatively it may be worth examining the small ads in local papers or contacting reclamation yards. Yellow pages will have details of local companies who may be willing to collect waste unsuitable for the Council's service.'

Question 6

Councillor John Wyatt to the Leader of the Council:-

'I am sure that the Leader will have seen the story in the EDP (headline of "City Hall blamed in food clash row", 11 October 2008) in which the City Council was blamed for scheduling two events at the same time – the Speciality Market and the Norfolk Food Fair. Does the Leader think it is fair to blame the City Council for this and what considerations do the Council take into account when granting permission for large scale but similar events to go ahead?'

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

'The Speciality Market has been operating in Norwich for many years and is an established event. It happens at the same time each year and we publicise the dates well in advance. This is the 3rd year of the Food Festival and it has never clashed before because it normally occurs later in the month. Organisations are entitled to run events on their own premises without seeking permission from the council, and indeed this is what VisitNorwich did with the Food Festival. It was after all held on private land.

Norwich City Council is the major public funder of VisitNorwich and so supports the Food Festival, so we were a little surprised to hear that despite our continued support we were being criticised in this way.

The Speciality Market is extremely popular and brings thousands of people into Norwich. I am sure in the end both complementary events capitalised on the increased footfall in the City over that weekend.'

Question 7

Councillor Evelyn Collishaw to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'Does the Executive Member have any details on how many square feet of:
(a) empty retail space and (b) empty office space there is currently in Norwich?'

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

'There is only a broad view of availability within the Norwich area for a number of reasons. The first of these being that not all closed shops or offices are necessarily being marketed for sale or to let and hence do not appear in the figures. Some open for trading shops are on the market as the tenant seeks to dispose of their interest, perhaps because of relocation to an alternative unit in the City. The final key factor is that not all the stock potentially available is in a condition that makes it available for use in the short term.

Retail availability is traditionally by numbers of shop units available, rather than by floor space. This is because the sizes of shop units vary considerably and, therefore, a square feet figure does not determine whether there are a lot of small units available, or one or two large ones. The latest figure is that there are 60 shop units available in Norwich.

For office space there is about 210,000 square feet of prime space available and on the market. The office space available represents just under 10% of total stock.'

Question 8

Councillor Antony Little to the Leader of the Council:-

'Will the Leader of the Council contact Government Minister Gerry Sutcliffe MP to push for the case for local authorities to have the ability to decide on the location of betting shops?'

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

'Councillor A Little should be aware that we already have power to determine the location of betting shops under existing planning and gambling legislation. Subject to the Council's adopted Statement of Principles under the Gambling Act 2005 which was adopted by the Council on 28 November 2006, all applications for betting shops are decided on the basis of:

- any relevant code of practice issued by the Gambling Commission;
- any relevant guidance issued by the Gambling Commission;
- the licensing objectives; and
- the Authority's statement of licensing policy.'

Question 9

Councillor Niki George to the Executive Member for Sustainable City Development:-

'Does the Council have a policy on how long it will give developers before action is taken to force them to bring new housing areas up to an adoptable standard?'

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

'The City Council does not have an express policy on how long it will give developers to bring a new road up to adoptable standard - it depends on the individual circumstances of each case.

It may be helpful if I may give you a brief overview of the adoption process. When a new road is to be built the developer will enter into what is called a Section 38 agreement with the City Council. The developer submits plans of the proposed new road and a bond to cover the cost of building that road. Once the City Council is satisfied that the road has been built to an adoptable standard an interim certificate of adoption is issued and 90% of that bond is refunded. If after a year there have been no problems or defects with the road the remainder of the bond is released, a final adoption certificate is issued and the road becomes public highway.

The bond is in place so that if the developer goes into liquidation the City Council will be able to complete the road. In very exceptional circumstances, if the developer has made it clear that they have no intention of completing the works; the Council may use the bond to fund the necessary works.

Most developers are keen to have their roads adopted as soon as possible because until the final certificate has been issued they remain legally liable for the road.

I am assuming Councillor George has the on-going situation at Draper Way and Weatherby Close in Bowthorpe in mind when asking this question. This development has yet to have the interim certificate issued due to problems with the street lighting and weed growth. City Council officers met with the developers last month to agree the work that is required to bring the Close up to an adoptable standard and they are confident that the work will be undertaken within the next few months. If Councillor George meant the above two areas of Bowthorpe when asking his question it would have been helpful if he had asked directly then I may have been able to deal with it more fully in my answer.'

Question 10

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

'Now the new council telephone number has been in use for nearly 4 months, can the Executive Member give us an update on how this is working? Can he say why the service to the public has not improved as residents still contact me to complain at not being able to reach City Hall staff.

Why is the new councillor dedicated number not provided with an answering service, given the occasions when it isn't answered? In terms of improving excellence what has the change in telephone numbers achieved?'

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

Since 1 July when the new number went live the service delivered to callers has been significantly improved with average waiting times for July of 1 minute 33 seconds, August of 1 minute 48 seconds and September of 1 minute 37 seconds. Information available from our new system shows that more people are able to get through to our Customer Service Advisors the first time they call. At peak times between 9 a.m. and 12 noon people may experience longer delays, but we also know that there are times during the day that people do not wait at all.

As part of the overall telephone improvement programme the Customer Contact Team are looking at ways in which they can resource more effectively the peaks around service requests. We continue to recruit staff to work at times and days of peak workload and have extended the total lunch period to ensure we have the minimum number of staff having a break at any one time. We have a modular training programme designed to support the new telephony system which enables new team members to be operational much faster than in the past and ensures that they are trained to deal specifically with calls on the busiest lines. We are also looking to provide queue messages and the choice to leave a message if you do not want to wait, to speak to an advisor or to self serve.

The councillor hotline number of 212613 is not a dedicated line just for councillors but is used by other internal customers. The hotline which was set up from 1 July 2008 is a 'pilot'. Councillors have been given access to this so for emergency enquiries they can call the Customer Contact Service direct. Councillors should put normal enquiries through the e-mail procedure. As somebody calling this hotline would generally be wanting someone to deal with an issue quickly, this number is covered at all times between 8am – 6pm. We will also set up Voicemail as a back-up. We know from feedback received that the level of service in the past has not been of the standard we would expect. However, procedures have been tightened up to ensure that a member of the Customer Contact Team is answering this line at all times. Any problems or feedback that could help us improve the service we provide would be appreciated.

The change in telephone number has achieved significant improvements in our ability to answer more calls than before, improve average waiting times, increase the

percentage of calls answered without transferring and enabled staff to be trained on specific service areas to ensure that requests get to the right person first time who has the knowledge and skills to deal with that enquiry.

The performance data for the first two quarters of this year are given below –

	Q1 – Apr – Jun (Pre new number)	Q2 – Jul – Sept (new Number live)
Calls answered by advisor	47%	83%
Calls answered within 120 seconds	65%	71%
Ave answer delay	114 secs	101 secs

Question 11

Councillor Brian Watkins to the Leader of the Council:-

‘Would the Leader explain what support the Council gives the Norwich Citizens Advice Bureau and, in the light of this support, why the Council has no representation on the CAB Board?’

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

‘The City Council gives the CAB £55,216 per year. We do not make it a stipulation of any grant that we have a member on the board and nor would we want to as that would be inappropriate. Councillor Watkins, along with all Group Leaders, was consulted on the list of which councillor sits on which organisation and that list came to Council on 22 July 2008. Why didn’t you mention it then?’

Question 12

Councillor David Fairbairn to the Executive Member for Customer Care and Residents Services:-

‘Could the Council review the system of cleaning street drains? It is noticeable that many street drains are full of grit and soil, and on every rainy day, it is easy to find drains that flood over and are not carrying the water away. Would it be possible to have a special response unit of drain cleaners who can respond immediately to information rather than relying on the routine cleaning programme?’

Councillor Brian Morrey’s reply in the absence of Councillor Julie Brociek Coulton, Executive Member for Customer Care and Residents Services:-

‘The Contract specifies that the contractor should keep the gulleys free-flowing and, as such, CityCare do provide a response unit. Whenever gulleys are reported as blocked the routine cleaning programme is suspended so that the appropriate vehicle can attend to the problem gully and clear the blockage. This should occur within 24 hours of the problem being reported.

Performance in this area is improving since control of the service switched to the dedicated Contract Management Team in Citizen Services. Amongst other improvements this change has led to CityCare replacing a vehicle that was subject to repeated mechanical failings and a backlog of programmed work is now being cleared. This is something that can be looked at when drawing up the specifications ready for the re-let of the contract'.

Question 13

Councillor Rosalind Wright to the Leader of the Council:-

'Will the Leader join me in signing the Federation of Small Business petition 'Keep Trade Local' and, in the light of this, would he outline how the Council promotes its business rate relief hardship fund and what the take-up of this fund has been?'

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

'Norwich City Council works closely with FSB who are active members of Norwich Economy Round Table and City of Norwich Partnership.

The Council would strongly support the spirit of the Federation of Small Businesses campaign Keep Trade Local. This campaign has only recently been brought to the Council's attention and it will require further exploration before I can give you an answer about whether it is appropriate for local authorities in general, and Norwich City Council in particular to become signatories.

What I can say is that supporting the local economy through encouraging local purchasing and procurement has been a key strand of the Council's economic development activity for some time. It was a major component in the Council's successful bid for Local Enterprise Growth Initiative funding.

This has resulted in support for Buy Local, a very successful campaign and membership organisation developed in partnership by the Federation of Small Businesses and other partners with support from the LEGI and council officers.

Through the LEGI programme, we have also commissioned a Local Procurement Initiative which has been running during 2008. 54 Norwich based businesses with over 200 employees were contacted and of these 29 agreed to provide information on the extent to which they put goods and services locally. Of these 23 were private sector organisations and 6 were public sector organisations. Discussions were held with them about their purchasing and procurement policies with advice offered about the ways in which they could place more of their business locally. Subsequently a workshop was held for purchasing and procurement officers to provide further information and support.

A report outlining this initiative "Doing Business in Norwich" was at the time placed in each Member Information Room and I have ensured that a fresh supply of reports have been distributed.

Norwich City Council's Head of Procurement has been involved in the development and scoping of this work and engaged in reviewing council policies in relation to purchasing and procurement.

Both small and large businesses have their part to play in keeping the local economy buoyant. While large businesses and public sector organisations may be constrained by legislation or company headquarters policy regarding how and where they purchase, most have the flexibility to place more of their purchasing within the local economy.

Small businesses are more likely to source and trade locally. Norwich is fortunate in having a wealth of small businesses, for instance in the independent retail sector.

The Buy Local and Procurement Initiatives are significant contributions to the FSB's campaign to Keep Trade Local. These have been designed to complement business to business activity undertaken by the Chamber of Commerce and local purchasing initiatives such as Produced in Norfolk.

All this work is based on what the New Economics Foundation calls the 'local multiplier effect'. A pound coming into the economy can be spent elsewhere and lost to the economy immediately or it can circulate within local businesses a number of times, multiplying the benefit of that pound each time it is spent. This is the driving principle behind the City Council's work on local purchasing and procurement, which is so vital to keeping the life blood of the local economy flowing.

Section 49 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 allows the Council to consider granting hardship relief to business ratepayers. The criteria for the grant of such relief are as follows: -

- the ratepayer would sustain hardship if the authority did not do so; and
- it is reasonable to do so having regard to the interests of persons liable to pay council tax set by it.

The scheme is not promoted but if businesses enquire about support they will be advised this is available. We receive very few applications for this.'

Question 14

Councillor Judith Lubbock to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'In a 'Revenue Budget Monitoring 08/09' report to the Executive on 17 September there is a statement 'New council homes project on hold'.

Please could the Executive Member explain which project to build new council homes is on hold and why and what expenditure has been spent on this project?'

(The statement can be found in table 2 entitled General Fund, under heading Strategic Housing.)

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

'I would like to thank Councillor Lubbock for her question. The language in the 'Revenue Budget Monitoring report' is rather more passive in tone than intended. The facts are as follows:

On 19 July 2007, Norwich City Council received confirmation from the Housing Corporation that we had pre-qualified for the 2008 -11 National Affordable Housing Programme.

This meant that Norwich City Council is among the approximately 108 organisations in the Country eligible to bid for a share of the Housing Corporation's £8bn that it has to spend over the 2008-11 period on the construction of new affordable homes.

In order to gain a clearer picture of the different options available to achieve this Norwich City Council tendered for Legal and Financial advice and from this exercise Lawrence Graham solicitors and Tribal Treasury Services were appointed.

Lawrence Graham and Tribal Treasury Services have produced a report that showed how a potential Special Purpose Vehicle could be set-up to develop new council homes; however this only achieves some of the original aspirations for the project.

To this end officers are investigating further options as to how 'new council homes' could be delivered and, also, how Government are revising housing finance which should make the process easier.

The expenditure on the project to date stands at £17,500 for the consultant's time and report. The work to date on behalf of Norwich City Council has been carried out within existing officer resources.'

Question 15

Councillor Roy Blower to the Leader of the Council:-

'Reading Borough Council has written to all Councils asking them to support the Campaign for Gurkhas' rights.

In 2004 the Government changed immigration rules to allow Gurkhas who had served in the army for at least 4 years to settle in the UK with their families with full pension rights. However, this offer only extended to those that had been discharged after 1 July 1997. This has caused considerable hardship to Gurkhas and their families that have settled here having been discharged before then, as they have no right to remain in the UK.

Does the Leader of the Council agree that the Council should support the campaign to extend those rights to those Gurkhas that were discharged prior to 1 July 2007?'

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

'In recognition of the exceptional service that Gurkhas have given to the UK, I will write a letter of support to the Campaign for Gurkhas' rights and will also write to the Immigration Minister urging him to grant Gurkhas fast track eligibility for either the right to remain in the UK or citizenship.'

Question 16

Question relating to Urgent Matters (Appendix 1, Rule 12.3 (ii))

The following question relating to urgent matters was taken with the consent of the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance.

Councillor Antony Little to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

'In the light of the current economic situation, would the Leader of the Council consider Norwich City Council taking the lead as a "good payer" by reducing the time taken to pay its invoices from 30 days to 20 days as a temporary way of helping local businesses in difficult times?'

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

'This is a complex area and the Council pays a variety of businesses of differing sizes that will have differing levels of exposure to the "credit crunch". A blanket change to 20 days from 30 days will not necessarily meet the desired outcome.

We have flexibility within the existing system and whilst 30 days are the standard terms some contracts do have reduced payments terms. Where a supplier may have difficulty with our 30 day payment terms we will negotiate reduced payment terms.

As part of the Councils wider strategy to ensure a vibrant local economy we constantly review payment terms to ensure that businesses are not disadvantaged. Any supplier who has difficulty with their existing terms should contact the Council and these terms will be reviewed.'