



NORWICH
City Council

COUNCIL

28 September 2010

Questions to Executive Members and Committee Chairs

Question 1

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

"It has come to my attention that the Council recently incorrectly issued a large number of court summons for unpaid Council tax. Can the Executive Member confirm how many residents are affected and what has been done to inform them of the mistake and ensure that this doesn't happen again?"

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

"The summonses were not incorrectly issued. Everyone who received one had a valid debt. They were withdrawn because, although the total amount of the debt was correct, a technicality with the dates meant that the summons would not be valid for court. A letter of apology was issued to everyone who received a summons as soon as was practicably possible. 1700 council tax accounts were affected.

Since the issue was identified we have been working closely with our colleagues in Steria and Northgate, however at this point in time the reason for the error has not been discovered so a solution has yet to be found.

If members of the public find themselves in financial difficulties they should contact the National Debt line on 0808 808 4000 for confidential help and advice.

Norwich City Council tenants should contact a Norwich City Council money advisor on 0344 980 3333.

There is more help and advice on our website."

Question 2

Councillor Claire Stephenson to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-

'Between July and September, when I was not a Councillor, I emailed the Residents Service Team's email address on over half a dozen separate occasions. Although I subsequently dealt with some of the issues which I raised through other forms of contact, not one of my emails received a reply. Is this experience typical when members of the public email the Council?'

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

"The organisation as a whole was averaging 7 days to answer emails during July to September. Having looked into the 8 emails received specifically from Councillor Stephenson between July and September every one was responded to by the service area.

Typically emails sent through the main mailbox which are processed by the contact team (old RST mailbox) are responded to on the day of receipt if they can be answered at the first point of contact or passed to the relevant service area to respond within the corporate service standard. The aim is to answer emails within five working days and a marked improvement has been seen with a third of service areas responding within 3 days."

Question 3

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

"There is every indication that, with a view to identifying savings and cutting public spending, the Coalition government is looking to require much closer working at a local level across public services including local government, health, welfare and policing. While I disapprove of the scale of the imposed cuts in general, I would like to know how the Council is preparing for this particular government requirement?"

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

"Councillor Little will be aware that partnership working between public sector bodies is nothing new. Norwich City Council is already very active in the field of partnership working, and I am confident that this will continue where there are opportunities to improve services and/or cut costs. The "Target Operating Model" for the future of the City Council, agreed by the Executive in June 2010, sets this out as a fundamental building block for more efficient and effective service delivery.

The City of Norwich Partnership (CoNP), which comprises public, private and voluntary sector bodies in the city, exists to promote and stimulate joint working to tackle key issues across the city area. The CoNP already oversees a number of examples of joint working within the city where local authorities, the police, health and other agencies actively share and pool resources, and work together.

A real Norwich example is the Motum Road Families Project, which has brought different agencies together to investigate the most efficient and effective process of meeting the needs of families that require multi-agency support in the Motum Road area. It will assess the level of intervention and support provided to a small number of identified families by public and third sector organisations, and will aim to improve services and reduce costs by removing duplication, streamlining processes and joining up interventions with the families.

In addition, there are already a number of examples where the City Council is already working in partnership. For example:

- The CNC Building Control Partnership (with Broadland and South Norfolk Councils – with Kings Lynn & West Norfolk Council now joining)
- The Norfolk Public Law partnership (with Norfolk County Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council)
- Joint community safety work with Norfolk Constabulary
- Joint consultation activity such as the Norfolk Citizens panel and “Place Survey”

A range of additional potential joint working opportunities, particularly in “back office” services, are also being explored at the current time.

The previous government had already taken steps to accelerate partnership working through the “Total Place” initiative which aimed to encourage public sector partners to go back to a blank sheet of paper, and re-design services from a customer perspective, so that overlaps and duplication could be removed, and both savings and better services secured.

It is not yet clear what the new Coalition government’s intentions are for partnership working. We understand that the core principles behind “Total Place” and partnership working are supported by the new government, but we also understand that “Total Place” will be re-branded as part of the proposed Localism Bill in the autumn of 2010. We will therefore need to wait a little longer to fully assess the future shape of public sector partnership working.

The City Council will therefore continue to seek out and explore viable joint and shared working opportunities. However, I believe that it is naïve to think that partnership working will be able to deliver the scale of efficiencies that the new government is proposing in the short timescale they want to use, and without any impact on local people. Experience has shown that mergers between organisations and services take time and effort to put in place, and inevitably result in major changes to how services are delivered, and to what standard. Wherever there is an opportunity to improve services through partnership it should be pursued, but my concern is that it may be used as vehicle to simply cut services and costs. The key to effective partnership working is to first identify the needs of the community, and to design a service around them, using the most efficient means available.”

Question 4

Councillor Ruth Makoff to the Executive Member for Housing and Adult Services:-

“Does the Executive Member share my concerns about the Prime Minister’s proposal to replace future council housing tenancies for life with fixed term tenancies, and if this becomes policy, could you reassure current and future tenants as to what the Council would do to protect them?”

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

"We will oppose attacks on security of tenancy for council tenants who pay their rent, look after their property and respect their neighbours and community. We believe that secure tenancies are a vital component in creating safe and secure communities. We would therefore strenuously resist the regressive proposal to replace housing tenancy for life with fixed term ones.

We are dealing with people's homes, not some commodity that can change simply because a finite period of tenure has come to an end or their circumstances have changed. The Choice Based Lettings system and allocations policy is in place to ensure that social housing goes to those people who are most in need of high quality, safe and affordable housing. These same people are very often those most vulnerable in society, as well as those who are unable to access homes in the private market. Many of our tenants will have been in council or other social housing for a number of years. They may well have been brought up in it, brought their own children up in it, and as a result developed a sense of community and place which the council believes should be fostered and enhanced, not destroyed.

Secure tenancies support stable and sustainable communities and play an important role in preventing homelessness, improving access to education and health services. Secure tenancies help save money for the NHS, through health and well being, the police, by preventing and reducing ASB, and education and social services by providing stable and secure homes for children, families and older people.

Whilst the Council will be willing to consider additional choice of tenures as part of the affordable housing strategy, it would wish to express a strong commitment to retaining secure tenancy for those who want it.

We are committed to continue working with our RSL partners to develop affordable home-ownership and intermediate rental schemes, which people will be able to buy or rent as their circumstances improve. It is important to ensure that people have the opportunity to realise their aspirations and improve their quality of life without the fear of worsening their housing situation as a result.

If this proposal progresses, then the Council will work with our partners in health, education and other stakeholders to reinforce the important role of secure tenancies throughout the social housing community."

Question 5

Councillor Steven Altman to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-

"Residents living in Randle Green and the surrounding area have been having problems with uneven paving slabs which are particularly hazardous at night, causing residents to trip. Council Officers have been contacted about this on a number of occasions but the problem still persists. Would the Executive consider prioritising this work immediately?"

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

"Thank you for drawing this to my attention. I have asked officers to arrange an additional reactive inspection in the Randle Green area and to arrange any repairs accordingly. Officers will up-date you with the outcome of this.

All adopted highways in the city are regularly inspected and repairs are identified and ordered in line with national guidelines and the County Council's Transport Asset Management Plan. Potential trip hazards are given greater priority the larger they are. In addition, potential trip hazards in busier locations are given greater priority over quieter locations. For this reason, busier locations such as the city centre and main road network are inspected more frequently as well."

Question 6

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

"Can the Executive Member give some idea of the number, and likely cost of the emergency contracts that we have committed to, in order to give emergency cover for contract 8?"

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

"There are eight contract areas covered by the emergency contracts including repairs, maintenance, gas, windows, kitchens and bathroom completions and voids. The total value will be around £1.2 million. The contracts are on a cost plus basis due to the short nature of the contracts, which is the cost of the labour, materials etc plus overheads plus a profit element. Due to the short term nature of the emergency contract the contractor cannot smooth out fluctuations and variations to achieve the most competitive price as would be the case in a longer term contract."

Question 7

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

"The collapse of Connaught, the social housing maintenance group and the contract it held with this Council has caused huge concern and disruption for the city's residents and tenants, and hardship for those 320 staff who have lost their jobs. The collapse has also caused many questions to be asked about the procurement process itself.

In order that there is public confidence in the Council's ability to let future contracts the Liberal Democrats are asking that there be a full independent inquiry into the procurement process which led to the Connaught Housing Repair and Maintenance contract.

Please will the Labour Executive who holds ultimate responsibility for letting the contracts agree to a full independent inquiry?"

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

"Connaught was a FTSE 250 company with a turnover of £650 million It had with over 150 contracts with local authorities so I think it is fair to say that its collapse has caused concern and disruption nationally.

Councillor Lubbock was involved in the cross-party procurement process so she understands from personal involvement the complex and thorough process undertaken in this matter. The process is also outlined in detail the report of the Deputy Chief Executive to Council this evening.

I think that time would be better spent moving forward rather than trying to rewrite history and what the City will want is the repairs and maintenance service running smoothly and jobs opportunities for former Connaught workers as soon as possible."

Question 8

Councillor Rupert Read to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"What contact did senior officers have with trade unions in the weeks immediately following the commencement of the Connaught contract in April?"

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

"Officers had significant contact with trades unions leading up to the commencement of the contract including union representatives attending the Contracts Working Party. During the mobilisation officers also met with union representatives. Once the contract started Officers had little contact as the key relationship was between Connaught Partnerships Limited as the employer and the unions. Officers have had regular contact with the unions since Connaught Partnerships Limited was placed in administration."

Question 9

Councillor Adrian Holmes to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"What is the Council doing to ensure that ex-Connaught employees are employed by any companies who may take over contracts previously held by Connaught?"

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

'Contractors providing services under emergency contracts had been asked to

approach JobCentre plus and give first consideration to ex Connaught employees, and we will do the same with any longer term contracts that are let. The Council also ran an advice day on 22 September for ex-Connaught employees offering advice on:-

- claiming benefits;
- applying for jobs;
- pensions advice;
- money advice.

They were also given the opportunity to register their interest in applying for a job with an incoming contractor.”

Question 10

Councillor Adrian Ramsay to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

“What efforts did the Council make to ensure that Connaught employees would have access to the equipment they would need to carry out their work when the new contract began in April?”

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

“There was a mobilisation plan with Connaught to get all services up and running for 1 April 2010 and this was monitored by the Council through regular meetings and reviews with the mobilisation team. This should have been a 3 month mobilisation period but this was significantly condensed due to the legal action taken by Morrison. The previous contractor owned the vast majority of equipment that they used and this was not transferred to the new contractor. The equipment was sold off as they were entitled to do with their property. Short term arrangements had to be put in place and this led to some equipment not being available at the very beginning of the contract but this was resolved as quickly as possible.”

Question 11

Councillor Peter Offord to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

“The Eastern Daily Press quoted the Leader of the Council on 7 September, saying “We are well geared up with contingency plans.” What were the plans to which he was referring?”

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

“I refer Councillor Offord to paragraph 19 of the report that has been issued to Members for this meeting.”

Question 12

Councillor Ash Haynes to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"What checks were carried out by the Council on Connaught Environmental before awarding that company the emergency contracts?"

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

"Connaught Environmental Ltd has not been placed in administration because it was considered to be a viable business. The company was part of the Connaught group and had been responsible for the delivery of services on behalf of Connaught Partnerships Ltd with whom the Council had its contract. A swift decision was taken that ensured that staff retained their jobs and that service disruption was minimised."

Question 13

Councillor Bob Gledhill to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"Can the Executive Member assure me that work will now be carried out, by the Council, to thoroughly explore and prepare for the option of bring some services in-house?"

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

"At the beginning of the process the Contracts Working Party and Executive thoroughly explored the option of bringing services in-house. However, given the scale of services, over £35 million per year, and the lack of ICT infrastructure, supply chains and management capacity, this was assessed as not being achievable. Instead a strategy of staggered contract re-let dates was agreed which allows for the in-house option to be fully tested as each contract ends. This is the strategy approved by the Executive and will continue to be explored.

APSE (Association of Public Service Excellence) has already been engaged to help the Council to assess possible options."

Question 14

Councillor Niki George to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"I understand attempts have been made to recoup monies lost in securing the Connaught contract and the cost of the emergency contractor. Could the Executive Member tell us where in the process these attempts are?"

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

"Councillor George is quite right that the Council will be attempting to recover any costs and this work is in its early stages."

Question 15

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

"What is the total cost of having awarded the contracts to Connaught, taking into account any cost of 'settling differences' with Morrisons; the cost of emergency contracts and the cost of the retendering the contracts previously run by Connaught and where will any additional costs be paid from?"

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

"Rather than focussing on costs, the Council saved £1 million per year on the environmental contracts that are charged to General Fund Revenue Budget, and 30% on the cost of housing repairs, maintenance and improvements. The cost savings to the General Fund Revenue Budget continue with the novation of contracts to Connaught Environmental. The final outcome and costs of the housing repairs, maintenance and improvements contracts have yet to be finalised. Also, as this work has not yet concluded a total cost cannot be given at this time. Any costs in relation to general fund activities such as refuse, grounds, street cleansing and arboriculture will be paid from the general fund and any costs in relation to housing activities such as repairs, maintenance and gas will be paid from the housing revenue account."

Question 16

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

"When will the uninsured, unsecured, storage area without planning permission on the Keyline car park on Weston Road, used by Connaught be removed, and the businesses on the site allowed to continue as they are now blocked in?"

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

"This is not within the Council's ownership or control. However, the use of the area does not require a change of use consent under planning. The Council is aware of a noise complaint relating to the previous use of the site by Connaught and are in contact with the complainant over this issue.

Any health and safety concerns on the site fall within the remit of the HSE, and these should be referred to them if applicable."

Question 17

Councillor Andrew Wiltshire to the Executive Member for Corporate Resources and Governance:-

"Many people in my ward have been in touch with me to report concerns they are paying their Council Tax but are not receiving the same service as residents in other parts of the city because their roads are either not adopted or not maintained. They have rightly pointed out that a refusal to pay their council tax could see them in court, but they are paying for services which they do not receive. What assurances can the Executive offer that the residents will soon receive an equitable level of service?"

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

"The Council is responsible for maintaining all adopted roads in the city. Officers undertake detailed inspections on a regular basis of the entire network and order repairs accordingly, in line with the County Council's Transport Asset Management Plan. The inspection work also helps to identify priorities for structural maintenance such as re-surfacing. If Councillor Wiltshire believes that there are specific areas of adopted highway within Bowthorpe which are not being properly maintained please can he draw them to officers' attention so action can be taken?"

Turning to those roads which are not adopted, responsibility for maintenance rests with the developer. Councillor Wiltshire will appreciate that it would be wrong for the Council to take on responsibility unless it was assured that the road was proven to be in good condition especially as such costs would be borne by the wider community.

Officers are working hard with the respective developers to ensure that roads can be adopted as soon as practically possible. At present, the only streets awaiting adoption in Bowthorpe – and anticipated dates for adoption – are as follows:

Location	Progress
Mardle Street	January 2010 subject to developer resolving minor defects
Dow Close	
Swallow Tale Close	
Weatherby Close	January 2011 subject to developer resolving defects followed by satisfactory 12 month maintenance period
Draper Way	
Barnham Close	

Council tax is used to pay for all the services provided, not just for maintaining roads and footpaths. If you do not use some of these services, it does not entitle you to a council tax rebate. For example, someone who does not have any children still has to pay full council tax even though they do not use schools. The only way to reduce the level of council tax is to appeal against the house valuation band using the district valuer."

Question 18

Councillor James Wright to the Executive Member for Residents and Customer Care:-

"During the recent election campaign I spoke to a number of residents concerned about the gradual closure of the cashiers' service at City Hall. Does the Executive Member share these concerns, and could they tell Council how many residents are still relying on the service?"

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

"Analysis shows that during the 28 week period between 1 March 2010 and 12 September 2010, 30% fewer customers attended City Hall to make payments. This was a reduction of 21,570 visits compared to 2 March 2009 and 13 September 2009.

The opening hours of the cashier service reduced to 2 hours per day from 1 September 2010 and this has coincided with an accelerated decrease in the number of customers using the service. Statistics show that 49% fewer customers used the service during the 4 week period ending 12 September 2010 compared to the same period last year (5200 in 2010 compared to 10238 in 2009).

Since February 2010, we have received a total of 13 complaints/comments about the closure of cashiers covering several issues as follows:-

- 5 comments about the information,
- 6 comments about different payment methods, and
- 2 general comments about the closure

All of these customers have been called or written to and individual support continues at all points of contact and will continue to be provided. A programme of ongoing support is included in each phase of the closure programme.

We have been dealing with problems raised by individuals on a personal and individual basis. If Councillor Wright will let me or the Head of the Customer Contact Team have the names and contact details for those who have raised concerns with him, I will ensure that each of them is contacted individually and that we give them the personal service we have promised to help deal with their concerns."