

Council

17 March 2015

Questions to cabinet members or chairs of committees

Question 1

Councillor Carlo to ask the portfolio holder for environment, development and transport:

“The officer report on Street Scheme Safety to the scrutiny committee of 26 February noted footfall at Norwich rail station as approximately four million people per annum. A good many of this number will cross the junction at Foundry Bridge / Riverside Road / Thorpe Road / Riverside on foot, or by bike, or sometimes on mobility scooters or with prams, to access the rail station.

The current junction is dominated by high volumes of sometimes fast moving traffic. It is unsafe and unpleasant and crossing times for pedestrians and cyclists are limited. The footpaths lining Riverside Road at the junction with Foundry Bridge are very narrow and provide inadequate space for waiting pedestrians, cyclists, families with prams, people with dogs, wheelchair and mobility scooters users. The junction creates a very poor impression of Norwich for people departing/arriving by train or visiting the Riverside area. It sends a message that cars are more important than people. It ought to be a pleasant area of Norwich, next to the river and close to the grand Thorpe Railway Station and its forecourt.

Ideally, the Riverside development ought to have been designed with reduced car access, instead of which car access has been maximised thus increasing traffic dominance in the area.

Does the cabinet member agree that a programme of works is required, with the aim of reducing traffic intrusion, increasing the safety of vulnerable users and generally creating a more pleasant area using shared space principles?”

Councillor Stonard, portfolio holder for environment, development and transport response:

“I would also like to see the junction outside the railway station by Foundry Bridge improved. As Councillor Carlo observes there is no doubt that the pedestrian experience at this location – as well as the streetscape more generally – could be made better.

That said the junction is a vast improvement on what it was prior to the Riverside development; a five arm junction with direct access onto the station forecourt, even narrower footways on Riverside and no formal pedestrian facilities. Whilst by no means perfect, the level of traffic dominance has improved and so has the pedestrian experience with an all red phase to cross all arms of the junction and dedicated pedestrian entrance to the station. It should also be remembered that in recent years with the opening of the Lady Julian Bridge an alternative route between the city centre and the rail station has been provided for pedestrians and cyclists that avoids the need for them to use the Foundry bridge junction. This route will become more attractive as the development at St Ann's Wharf comes on stream.

To bring about further improvement would not be straightforward. It is also not an investment priority within the Norwich Area Transportation Strategy (NATS) at the present time. To simply reduce road space for motor vehicles would increase congestion and extend vehicle queueing which in turn would be likely to reduce air quality, in an area where concerns have already been raised about this issue. It is also further likely to displace traffic into the neighbouring residential streets and would cause significant delays to the numerous bus services that serve the railway station and suburbs to the north east of the city.

The proposed Northern Distributor Route could help mitigate such effects however I believe that further works would also be required to ensure traffic was effectively managed and we did not simply solve one issue and create another. Such works would be most likely to be very costly, involve land take and major works to Foundry bridge and therefore would not be a short term solution.

I will ask officers, however, to incorporate a review of the issues and to examine possible ways forward as part of any review of NATS."

Question 2

Councillor Henderson to ask the portfolio holder for environment, development and transport:

"The issue of flooding is an ongoing issue in my ward. Norfolk County Council has submitted a £10m bid to the government for upgrading the drainage system in parts of north Norwich following last summer's floods. The reasons for the flooding were identified in a flood investigation report published in January. They include the failure by Norwich City Council to maintain the drainage system on a regular basis. Will the cabinet member give a commitment that the city council will do a better job in future to ensure that the drainage systems for Norwich are maintained to a far higher standard than hitherto?"

Councillor Stonard, portfolio holder for environment, development and transport response:

“The council has responsibility to clean the highway gulley system in the city and it is taking steps to improve this. Over recent years a new contractor has greatly improved the state of the gulley system and, for example, successful steps have been taken to better ensure that cleaning is not prevented due to parked cars.

The rainfall last summer that led to surface water flooding was exceptional. The rain on 27 May was a 1 in 16 year event and on 20 July the rain was a 1 in 121 year event. Most drainage systems, however, have been designed for a 1 year or perhaps 5 year event. Therefore even with the largely clear flowing gulley systems on Carrow Road, Kerrison Road, Brazengate and Wellesley Avenue flooding still occurred. Also even if the gulley system can cope the amount of rainfall may still exceed the capacity of the sewer system.

The council is working with Norfolk County Council and other partners such as Anglian Water who are responsible for the sewer system to try to reduce the likelihood and impact of surface water flooding. As part of this we will be spending a further 18% on the existing gulley cleaning and jetting budget.

The bid referred to by Councillor Henderson is part of this partnership work as identified in the flood investigation report. I hope it will be successful as it will provide over £500,000 to improve highway drainage infrastructure in Beatrice Road, Woods Close, Dowding Road/Mallory Road, Hellesdon Road Bridge, Telegraph Lane East, Wellesley Avenue South and Plumstead Road as well as gully replacement more generally. The funding has been bid for based on need and the practicalities of spending such funding over a relatively short timescale (3 years). The majority of funds are to be spent outside the Norwich administrative area and elsewhere in the urban area. This includes locations such as Old Catton, Sprowston and Thorpe St Andrew.”

Question 3

Councillor Bogelein to ask the portfolio holder for neighbourhoods and community safety:

“In the consultation about the proposed skateboard ban for the inner city, people were only asked if the area of the ban should be made bigger or not. Only 6% of the respondents said they would like to see a bigger area. Unfortunately there was no option for respondents to choose a smaller area or to object to the ban. This was reflected in a high number of people using the comment box provided. Over 255 people left comments on the ban. Of these 255 responses, 14 were in favour of the ban, which means over 240 people took the time to write often quite elaborate objections to the ban. The original report going to full council (before the new PSPO was proposed) stated:

Outline conclusions from the consultation

8. The consultation illustrates the strongly opposed views of city centre users, skateboarders, people who live and work in the city and those who visit. Only 6% of people think it should be made bigger than outlined by cabinet. However, the strong 'voice' against the proposed byelaw comes mainly from skateboarding enthusiasts.

9. Other people are in support of the byelaw and think it should be made wider. It is a difficult balancing act but the council has to consider the needs of all city centre users.

I am not certain where some of the conclusions come from. Although some comments reveal that the respondent is a skateboarder, others specifically state that they are not. I am also not certain where point 9 originated from. I am aware that there were representations from war veteran associations, but equally the council received representations from the skateboarding community. Does the cabinet member see this as an accurate representation of the results from the consultation and thus a legitimate conclusion to propose the ban?"

Councillor Driver, portfolio holder for neighbourhoods and community safety response:

"Cabinet rejected original the proposal for the size of the area to be protected from damage by skateboarding. In doing this we took on board skateboarders concerns and asked for the area to be made smaller. So the consultation referred to in your question was about whether people agreed or not with the our decision to reduce it.

We had 312 responses to this consultation in total.

6% wanted it bigger

92% said it shouldn't be made bigger

2% didn't know.

The report gave a selection of comments and clearly stated that there were differing views.

Cllr Bogelein will also recall that council on 25th November 2014 in response to this consultation revised its approach again. At that meeting it was agreed to reduce the area further with the intention of specifically protecting just the War Memorial and gardens from damage due to skateboarding.

We also agreed to look at addressing the other areas outlined in the originally proposed boundary, through a collaborative approach that would see the council ask the skateboarding community to work together on resolving issues of inconsiderate activity, such as that which causes damage to buildings.

This was about taking joint responsibility for our city while also allowing people to enjoy it in the way in which they want.

We are currently looking at whether a PSPO provides a more flexible way forward for protection of the War memorial and one that will hopefully provide the balance needed on a topic that has generated such wide ranging opinions.

At the heart of the process is the need to protect and engender respect for the War Memorial and gardens to make sure that they are not subject to any further damage.”

Question 4

Councillor Maxwell to ask the deputy leader and portfolio holder for resources:

“After supporting a resident who had been found unfairly ‘fit for work’ by ATOS, would the deputy leader wish to explain the wider impact of ATOS upon constituents in both Crome Ward and across Norwich? Can he describe any recent examples and what advice would he give the government on the implementation of their welfare reform policies upon his constituents?”

Councillor Waters, deputy leader and portfolio holder for resources:

“Thank you for your timely question. If you want a symbol of all that is wrong with ‘fit for work’ tests you just have to visit the former ATOS (now Maximus) assessment centre at St Mary’s House in Duke Street, Norwich. It is not accessible to wheelchair users or to people with walking difficulties. In any case people with mobility problems are unable to use the centre because of fire risk. Norwich residents going through work capability tests to be eligible to claim Employment Support Allowance, with mobility problems are being directed to centres as far away as Ipswich and Nottingham. The Department of Work and Pensions is ultimately responsible for the way this service is delivered. The venue they have chosen could not be more inappropriate. Is this part of the Coalition Government’s drive to cut the welfare budget? If so it is creating massive hardship.

I am grateful to Equal Lives for providing a number of case studies that shows the human cost of punitive policies.

A doctor at local GP practice in Norwich wrote to ATOS in 2013 about a patient whose long-term physical and mental condition made the idea of getting that person off benefits and into work an act of cruelty. The doctor wrote, “How far are you going to push her? Does she need to make a suicide bid before you will stop? You have to take some responsibility for the effects your actions have on people. I think you should acknowledge that X cannot work and allow her to draw her meagre benefits in peace”.

A further insight into how the system operates for individuals caught up in work capability assessments is titled: 'The Circle of Ludicracy':

1. Ignoring GP advice a client is called for assessment, found fit for work
2. Client appeals decision
3. After anything up to a year, client attends appeal hearing
4. Appeal is allowed, client awarded ESA
5. Client called for another assessment, found fit for work
6. Repeat 2-5 as long as you can put up with it!

I would draw your attention to the following facts:

Judge Robert Martin, outgoing President of the Social Entitlement Chamber, has described the Work Capability Assessment process as being in 'virtual collapse'

Citizens Advice Bureaux have been swamped with people needing help appealing inaccurate decisions.

In June of last year the Minister of State for Disabled People admitted that 700,000 people are still waiting for work capability tests.

Atos, as reported in the Guardian Newspaper in January 2015, " Bombarded with abuse and with its reputation tarnished has bought its way out its £400m state contract to assess if benefit claimants are fit to work". To be replaced by Maximus, an American company, that according to 'Source Watch' has a controversial record in the United States, including paying a \$30.5 million to settle Medicaid fraud criminal charges and a string of contract failures.

The Coalition Government paid Atos £80 million a year for its WCA contract, but Maximus will receive between £590 million and £650 million over three years depending on performance, but according to the Guardian Maximus plans to reduce the proportion of doctors carrying out medicals in favour of cheaper occupational therapists. They will also continue to use the same software to assess claimants using the same legal criteria.

More public money spent on a system which cruel and unfair. In a commons debate in 2013, MPs revealed that 1,300 people had died after being told that they should start preparing to go back to work.

My advice to anyone in Norwich, who is at the receiving end of Maximus Work Capability Assessments and is unhappy, let your local councillors know about it. Only by constantly publicizing this awful regime which costs more to deprive people of the support they should be entitled too than it does to pay for a reasonable level of support, should be brought to an end as soon as possible."

Question 5

Councillor Woollard to ask the portfolio holder for housing:

“Could the cabinet member for housing update the council once again regarding the impact upon Norwich families and individuals of the ‘bedroom tax’ and the steps are being taken to support those afflicted by this vicious tax?”

Councillor Bremner, portfolio holder for housing’s response:

“The numbers of households affected by bedroom tax remain at the same levels, 2405 social housing tenants, previously reported in Nov 2014. (Details below) The next full review of numbers affected and rent arrear levels for council tenants will be available in April 2015.

To date no council tenant has been evicted for rent arrears that are solely due to bedroom tax.

At the end of Oct 2014 a total of 2,405 (15%) of social housing tenants in Norwich were having a weekly reduction in their housing benefit entitlement in respect of the bedroom tax.

- 1889 have a one bedroom 14% reduction
- 344 have a 25% reduction for two bedrooms plus.

The average amount of weekly housing benefit deducted for those with one ‘surplus’ bedroom is £11.17 and for those with a two bedroom plus deduction the average is £20.96

The anticipated annual benefit loss for those with a one bedroom deduction is £558 and for two bedroom plus deduction £1048.

The current rent arrears situation for council tenants continues to be mitigated by two main factors:

- Extensive support available to tenants in preventing and resolving budgeting difficulties
- An effective campaign to ensure the discretionary housing payment scheme is fully utilised.

Nationally, a number of Housing benefit appeal tribunals have taken place recently concerning the definition of a bedroom. Although no decisions have resulted in significant changes in legislation, the tribunals have increasingly taken a pragmatic approach to individual circumstances regarding the size, shape and use of disputed bedrooms.

In Norwich, further grant funding has been provided to the voluntary sector to ensure independent debt advice is available for all tenures and another job fair /welfare reform event for all residents is planned for St Andrews Hall in September, focusing on jobs and training. This will be the fourth welfare reform event and will take attendance at these events to over 2000 residents.

The next welfare reform challenge will be the introduction of universal credit for new single claimants in receipt of jobseekers allowance. Under this change

housing costs will be paid direct to claimants who will then have to make arrangements to pay their full rent. Currently housing costs are paid directly to the council. Locally this change will commence in Breckland in February with significant effect in Norwich planned for December 2015.”

Question 6

Councillor Manning to ask the leader of the council:

“Can the leader give her opinion on the potential benefits of Norwich hosting BBC Radio 1’s Big Weekend on Saturday 23 and Sunday 24 May 2015 and the role the city council communications team took to help secure this event?”

Councillor Arthur, leader of the council’s response:

“Thank you for your question.

This is an incredible event for the city to have won. Many Cities up and down the land will have competed hard to win this event. And will have been very sad indeed not to have won it.

The benefits for our city from hosting this event are many. Thousands of our young people will get the opportunity to go to the largest free ticketed music festival in the UK - on their own doorstep. They will be able to see amazing, world class music acts and for free.

Some of them will also get the opportunity to take part in workshops as part of the build up to the festival.

In the coming months the name of Norwich will be promoted on Radio 1, BBC TV and online. We will also be talked about in national and international media. All this will bring the name of Norwich to millions of people, which in turn is worth many millions of pounds of free marketing for our city to potential visitors.

Over the weekend itself thousands of people will come to Norwich to spend their money in our shops, restaurants and bars and hotels.

But even people who are not lucky enough to come that weekend will still hear the name of Norwich connected with some of the biggest music artists in the world and be able watch the event live from Norwich wherever they are.

The council has been working to get this event to the city for some time, our culture and events team have doggedly pursued the BBC for nearly 10 years and this year their tenacity has truly paid off.”

Question 7

Councillor Ryan to ask the portfolio holder for environment, development and transport:

“Since our last meeting it was announced that Labour led Norwich City Council has been successful in its bid to win £8.4m of funding to make more improvements to cycle routes across the city. Can the cabinet member for environment, development and transport explain his opinions on the likely improvements and benefits of the scheme?”

Councillor Stonard, portfolio holder for environment, development and transport’s response:

“The new funding will enable us to do many good things to make the city a better place over the next four years. By making it easier to ride a bike in the city we can make big strides towards helping tackle health problems, make it easier for people to access jobs without spending lots of money on travel, save carbon from unnecessary car journeys and avoid tragic accidents happening.

The current phase of Push the Pedalways concentrates on the pink pedalway which crosses the city from west to east. The main focus of the next phase using the new money will be on comprehensively improving the north to south yellow and blue pedalways so that they can be ridden confidently by people who currently feel nervous about getting on a bike.

We are at the start of the design process and each project will be shaped by public consultation. Some of the highlights are likely to be:

- Extending 20mph areas across a much larger part of the city
- Replacing the graffiti daubed subway under St Crispins with a wide prominent crossing on the surface to overcome the inner ring road barrier and help to regenerate Anglia Square
- Making the junction of Woodcock Road and Catton Grove Road safer so that people can walk and cycle around it more easily
- Creating new links to the businesses in the airport industrial estate without needing to ride along Fifers Lane
- Extending the benefits of the Magdalen Street project that is currently being built up Magdalen Road
- Making Lakenham Way better for cycling, walking and wildlife.
- Providing a better link to the University Technical College on Old Hall Road
- Making the centre of Eaton easier to cycle through and enhancing the appearance of the conservation area and complementing the bus waiting areas
- Helping people to cycle up to Newmarket Road from Eaton and cross over Newmarket Road to Unthank Road
- Incorporating protected space for cycling on Newmarket Road between the outer ring road and St Stephens Road.

These sorts of projects show that making places better for cycling can make places better for business, for residents and for pedestrians.”

Question 8

Councillor Herries to ask the portfolio holder for housing:

“Social housing maintenance experts, the Direct Works Forum (DWF), carried out a survey of one hundred housing associations and local authorities (covering one and a half million homes) and, of those that responded, 90% noted increased reports of condensation dampness - a trend they put down to changes such as the ‘bedroom tax’ and fuel poverty.

Some members of the DWF reported that tenants had asked maintenance staff if their gas supply could be cut off so they would not be tempted to use heating they knew they would not be able to afford.

Can the cabinet member for housing comment on what the council can do to address these concerns?”

Councillor Bremner, portfolio holder for housing’s response:

“Over recent years the Council has seen an increase in the level of damp being reported within tenant’s homes, and costs for remedial works were escalating quite dramatically. In 2012/13 NPS Norwich carried out a full review of the way in which reports of damp were dealt with which has resulted in an improved service to tenants and the cost of remedial work decreasing. Essentially there is now a lot more information given to tenants such as leaflets and advise to help them understand what causes damp and condensation and what they can do to reduce this occurring, as well as how to get the best out of their heating system and reduce the running costs at the same time as reducing the conditions which will allow condensation and damp to occur. In addition a damp video is currently being commissioned (with involvement from tenants) which will be provided (and sold on to other organisations) with the leaflet and help tenants reduce damp and condensation.

The current process consists of every report of damp being followed up with a telephone call to discuss the issue with the tenant and try to establish if the problem is caused by condensation or rising or penetrating damp. If it is clearly condensation then advice is provided over the telephone and the tenant advised to contact again in 6 weeks if the recommended actions have been followed but the conditions have not improved. If the cause is not clear from the telephone conversation or if it is clearly not due to condensation then an appointment is made for a surveyor to visit, identify the cause and arrange the necessary remedial work. This process has been very successful in reducing unnecessary work and in helping educate tenants around damp.

In addition to the above the Council is investing a considerable amount of money in its housing stock to both maintain and improve it to a high standard but also to ensure the homes are as thermally efficient as possible in order to reduce tenant's fuel bills.

Works currently being carried out which contribute to this are:

- Replacement of old inefficient boilers with high efficiency boilers.
- Communal boilers being replaced with now high efficiency boilers with 'Combined Heat & Power' units.
- External and internal wall insulation programmes to non-standard constructed and solid wall properties.
- Installation of PV, and thermodynamic panels.
- Roof insulation upgrades to levels above current building regulation standard.
- Installation of cavity wall insulation where none exists or where it has slumped over time.
- Replacement windows.
- Replacement composite doors.
- Installation of extractor fans with all new kitchen and bathroom upgrades.
- Low energy lighting in communal lighting upgrades.

The above list is not exhaustive but includes the main programmes of work.

Finally it is worth noting that average SAP (a national method of assessing how thermally efficient a property is) across the country for the private sector is generally around 50, whilst the average for social housing is in the 60's, however the SAP score for the Councils stock is 71, which puts us in the top quartile nationally."

Question 9

Councillor Gayton to ask the deputy leader and portfolio holder for resources:

“Can the cabinet member for resources give his opinion to council on the importance and opportunities contained within the *Reducing inequalities action plan* which was presented to cabinet last week and how this will help extend financial inclusion and tackle entrenched inequalities such as child poverty, low wages, in-work poverty and poor health outcomes?”

Councillor Waters, deputy leader and portfolio holder for resources response:

“The report to Cabinet highlighted some of the persistent inequalities within Norwich such as child poverty, low wages and in-work poverty and a number of unequal health outcomes.

As well as highlighting a number of activities taken over previous years it suggested a number of initial actions as well as the development of a broader reducing inequalities action plan for the future, in line with the new corporate plan.

It is envisaged that this could form the basis of a rolling three action plan capable of review and amendment each year as challenges change or opportunities arise.

Council will be aware that residents may at times experience multiple issues of inequality, and it is important that support and services aimed at reducing inequality are joined up to reflect these needs and as far as possible prioritising some of the main drivers of economic and financial inequality.

Individuals may come into contact with and seek help from a variety of public and voluntary organisations and therefore collaboration and understanding what is on offer in Norwich is key.

Based on this, a number of key themes are proposed:

- a) Making best use of resources both within the council and across partner agencies and sectors.
- b) The connection between low income and poor health and other life outcomes including education and quality of life.
- c) Well documented variations in income and other outcomes across parts of the city and the need to explore not only universal offers but also targeted work in particular communities.
- d) The fact that not all people and communities are always equally placed to necessarily benefit from either initiatives, schemes or any general economic upturn.
- e) Just as health is now often perceived ‘as everybody’s business’, so reducing inequalities can become part of the whole council ‘business as usual’ and cut through all activities.

- f) It should be possible to expect that all our activities and funding streams consider reduction of inequalities and making best use of those assets and funds to try to reduce the gaps.

Some key principles include the following:

Drawing together universal service provision across the city but targeting of certain activities toward parts of the city where inequalities are the most marked, where there are opportunities to work with partners and add value to existing resources and opportunities.

Join up activity with other public and voluntary sector partners where there is evidence of need and other sources of funding in order to maximise impact and reduce duplication given that some individuals may experience multiple issues of inequality.

Take advantage of new opportunities where they arise e.g. accessing new funding streams if they were to become available. ”

Question 10

Councillor Barker to ask the portfolio holder for environment, development and transport:

“Can the cabinet member for environment, development and transport give his opinion on the opportunities contained within the establishment of a collective solar auction scheme and how this will further our low carbon city aspirations within the council’s environmental strategy?”

Councillor Stonard, portfolio holder for environment, development and transport’s response:

“This new innovative project will be the first of its kind in the UK. It shows that the city council aspires to be a low carbon and sustainable City. Our offices, who are presently designing the programme, hope it will be as successful as the councils Big Switch and Save.

The scheme hopes to offer considerable savings to those who decided to register. (Between 15-20%). We hope that this, plus the city councils previous track record delivering the Switch and Save and Cosy City programmes will encourage private sector households to install PV with a new confidence. It has been suggested that citizens are more likely to adopt the technology if the council plays a supporting role due to our high trust levels as the solar market has suffered from unrepeatable firms delivering low quality products.

DECC data suggests that 324 PV systems have been installed in Norwich from 2010. It is hoped that the establishment of a new solar auction will

double this figure in one year (2015/16) and thereafter uplift the installation rate by 10-20% per year.

If these targets are achieved this equates to a 600 tonne per year saving in CO₂ **or** a 1,800,000 less miles driven in Norwich!"