



Council

14 March 2023

Questions to cabinet members

Question 1

Councillor Galvin to ask the leader of the council the following question:

“Thank you for working with me to write to the UEA Vice Chancellor to convey the council’s grave concerns at the university’s financial situation; that loss of staff expertise and the removal of key subject areas would fundamentally undermine its role as a cultural hub and would create an additional barrier for the community to access knowledge and learning beyond school age; and that as more and more pupils go on to study at university while living at home, we are concerned about how people here will access higher education and a range of subjects. Job cuts would also have a profound effect on local businesses: fewer employees and fewer students would damage the local economy. What other steps do you think we can take as a council to push for alternatives to compulsory redundancies which would damage the university and the region?”

Councillor Waters, the leader’s response:

“Thank you, Councillor Galvin for your question. The letter signed by all group leaders at city hall was sent to Chair of the University Council, Dr Sally Howes, outlining the concerns which you have summarised in your question. The University is for the moment, without a Vice Chancellor. The letter was circulated to all members of UEA council and also sent to all unions represented on campus. I have had face to face meetings with the union branch secretary as well as direct discussions with Dr Howes.

There is a strong consensus that the university needs to find a way through the very difficult financial situation it currently faces, so it can continue to be a university of choice for students by providing a wide range of courses as well as continuing to play a vital role in the life of the city and of the region.

The city council has a very strong relationship with the UEA built on extensive partnership working. We have offered to the UEA leadership insights from our own experience of successfully tackling a decade or more of deep cuts in central government funding, to protect vital services to city residents. That offer has been warmly received.”

Question 2

Councillor Catt to ask the leader of the council the following question:

“After the tragic murder of Brianna Ghey, a vigil was held outside City Hall for people to pay their respects and stand in solidarity with the trans community as her death was another tragic sign of their plight and the cruel culture war that is spreading through our country with many people forgetting about the huge impact this has had on one of the most vulnerable communities in the country to the point that many now feel very unsafe here. Having passed a motion last year supporting the transgender community and agreeing to fly the trans flag on certain days, would the council consider temporarily flying the trans flag in honour of Brianna Ghey and in solidarity with the wider trans community who are grieving, and supporting this with appropriate comms?”

Councillor Waters, the leader’s response:

“Norwich has a long history as a welcoming and inclusive city for all. The recent vigil after the tragic death of Brianna Ghey shows that the people of our city stand in solidarity with the trans community.

As a council we will continue to honour our firm and visible commitment to supporting our trans community here in Norwich. We will do this by using City Hall, a landmark building, to promote two important events in the calendar.

The first will be on 31 March when we will fly the transgender Pride flag to show our support for International Day of Trans Visibility. The second will be on 20 November when we will fly the transgender flag to support the Trans Day of Remembrance – an annual global event honouring the memory of transgender people whose lives have been lost in acts of anti-transgender violence. This will give people the opportunity to remember not only Brianna Ghey, but all those who have been killed due to anti-transgender hatred or prejudice.

I would add that we have flown the the LGBT Rainbow Flag throughout Pride every year. From this year’s Pride we will be flying the Progress Pride flag, to demonstrate our broad support for the entire LGBT community and have done so for over ten years.

Everyone is welcome in Norwich, and we will continue to work as a council, and with our partners, to ensure this is the case.”

Question 3

Councillor Schmierer to ask cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth the following question:

“Despite a large increase in the number of people living in the city centre since 2001, no new green public open space has been created here since Castle Green in the 1990s. As a result, there is increasing pressure on the small number of green public open spaces in the city centre, in particular on Chapelfield Park. The Greater Norwich Local Plan states that a minimum of 2 hectares of green infrastructure per 1,000 population will be provided for the informal recreational needs of residents as an alternative to visiting protected sites. Natural England’s new standard for local authorities for accessible green space is at least 3 hectares per 1,000 population. Will the Council ensure that developers of major city centre sites, notably Anglia Square, make a significant contribution to providing new publicly accessible green space in the city centre area?”

Councillor Stonard, the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth’s response:

“Planning applications are determined in accordance with the development plan that is in force at the time. Whilst the GNLP is moving towards adoption, it is not the development plan at the moment so applications are determined in accordance with the Joint Core Strategy (JCS) and the 2014 Local Plan (LP), unless material planning considerations dictate otherwise. JCS1 and JCS11 are the relevant JCS policies; DM8 is the LP policy used by the council. These policies encourage the provision of both formal and informal open space but don’t refer to a specific quantum of provision. When we consider applications for major development under the current policies, we work with partner organisations including Natural England to ensure that the provision is adequate in terms of both quality and quantity. How this applies to specific planning applications is a matter for Planning Applications Committee.”

Question 4

Councillor Haynes to ask the cabinet member for climate change and digital inclusion the following question:

“What system is in place for ensuring that residents are made aware of all work that will be taking place on their property and all visits from council officers or contractors? I am aware of numerous cases where residents are awaiting repairs or appointments with officers but receive no communication from the council telling them when this will be taking place. This has led to further delays where residents were not available. Sometimes, in the case of communal / external areas, contractors have entered a property without the consent of residents which can be a disrespectful and distressing experience for some who are already feeling let down by the council’s inadequate systems for dealing with housing repairs.”

Councillor Hampton, the cabinet member for climate change and digital inclusion’s response:

“We have asked NCSL Operations director and Lead consultant to comment on this, as the majority of repairs sit with them, their comments are;

“NCSL carry out work by an appointments-based system, most of these appointments are made with the NCC contact centre with the resident at the first point of contact when the repair is being reported. If there are changes to appointments this is done by contact with the resident via telephone or email if available. For communal repairs appointments are made with any contact number that is available within the order. NCSL would never enter an individual occupied property without the residents’ permission, for communal areas our staff will carry out works are directed on the order on occasions there will be no contact number. All NCSL staff wear branded uniforms and vehicles and carry their ID cards.”

Question 5

Councillor Grahame to ask the leader of the council the following question:

“The council has a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act to assess risks of emergencies and plan accordingly. The council has not received guidance on the actions that the authority should take in the event of a nuclear accident or incident involving nuclear weapons, since the upgrading of weapons’ storage facilities at RAF Lakenheath was observed. Will the responsible cabinet member seek such guidance in the next two weeks and report back the findings on a cross-party basis as soon as possible to all councillors?”

Councillor Waters, the leader’s response:

“The Council works collaboratively with partners in the Norfolk Resilience Forum (NRF) to ensure that the provisions of the Civil Contingencies Act are met.

The Government’s Resilience Adviser has stated that there is no increased threat level, and no updated guidance has been issued with regard to a nuclear incident.

Nuclear sites and the UK civil nuclear sector are heavily regulated by laws and regulation. The preparation of emergency plans is a legislative requirement and there are defined emergency planning zones around civil nuclear sites, with information provided to the public who are within those zones. There is further information available in the public domain and I will get this sent to you.

The Civil Contingencies Act (2004) requires the NRF to identify local risks that may impact the County. Partners within the NRF have access to the updated National Security Risk Assessment (NRSA), which supersedes the National Risk Register 2020. An updated public document is expected to be published this year. Risks are regularly reviewed, and work is ongoing to update the NRSA to assess the impacts for Norfolk.

I am satisfied that sufficient work is going on to address this issue but should the situation materially change we will of course review the situation again with the NRF.”

Question 6

Councillor Carlo to ask the cabinet member for community wellbeing the following question:

“Forest Research (FR) has assessed the baseline tree canopy coverage for English towns and cities. In 2016 Norwich was assessed as having 18.6% coverage (+ or – 1.74). In 2020, FR analysed Norwich’s tree canopy coverage at electoral ward level. Nine wards have coverage lower than FR’s recommended 20% minimum provision. Four wards are very low: Mancroft (10.7%), Sewell (11%), Catton Grove (12%), Nelson (13.5%). FR advises councils to set a minimum target of 20% canopy coverage within 10 to 20 years. For towns and cities with at least 20% cover, FR recommends at least a 5% target increase. It is essential to make tree planting a strategic priority for achieving net zero. Will the council set a 20% tree canopy coverage target by 2030, with a 15% target for the lowest wards, plus a 25% stretch target for Norwich by 2035, and make the city-wide targets a KPI in the Corporate Plan?”

Councillor Giles, the cabinet member for community wellbeing’s response:

“Tree Canopy survey work has also been undertaken by the Natural Norfolk Team at Norfolk County Council as part of both the Greater Norwich Green Infrastructure Strategy and the Biodiversity Development Plan.

Their approach uses a different methodology to Forest Research and is based on LIDAR surveys of vegetation over 3m in height across the city. LIDAR is a detection system which works on the principle of radar but uses light from a laser and is considered to be accurate. The survey results using this methodology suggest that tree canopy cover in Norwich is 25.1%.

As part of our ambitious Biodiversity Strategy, and specifically in the redrafting of the Tree Strategy, a survey methodology and a new ambitious target will be proposed for average canopy cover in Norwich to 2040. We recognise that the distribution of canopy cover is considerably less in some wards than others and so planting schemes will be proposed to improve canopy cover in wards which fall below the average. A tree canopy cover measure is included in the current reporting metrics for our Biodiversity Development Plan.”

Question 7

Councillor Osborn to ask the deputy leader and cabinet member for social housing the following question:

“Since October 2022, multiple residents and I have repeatedly reported faulty street lights at Haslips Close. After nearly five months, the lights are still not fixed. I have now been informed that the council believed the contract for maintenance lay with RG Carter, when in fact it had reverted to the city council. I would expect that the council would have oversight of maintenance contracts and who is responsible for what. Please can the Cabinet Member provide details of how oversight is maintained?”

Councillor Harris, the deputy leader and cabinet member for social housing’s response:

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention. The adoption of highways, including streetlights, on this development was due to be completed through dedication, rather than requiring a section 38 agreement. This was because Highways was managed at the time by the City Council but unfortunately, the County Council has subsequently ended the arrangement and taken control back in house. It appears that the dedication wasn’t completed prior to this change and therefore County have not taken these streetlights into their maintenance programme. Officers are now liaising with colleagues in County to take progress this adoption for future maintenance. In the meantime, officers have raised orders to ensure the lights are working and are liaising with the power provider to ensure correct responsibility for the streetlights is noted for now and in the future”

Question 8

Councillor Price to ask the leader of the council the following question:

“Following the release of the LGA Corporate Challenge peer review feedback report, a number of key recommendations have been proposed. One key recommendation supports Green councillors’ views that further consideration of the governance arrangements of both NRL and NCSL is needed, to bring them in line with recommended best practice. This best practice suggests that members of this council should not sit on the company board, but that instead, supervision should be exercised through a shareholder panel. Does the cabinet member now share this view, and will they prioritise this recommendation as a part of the internal audit plan 23/24?”

Councillor Waters, the leader’s response:

“The recent LGA Peer Review paints a very positive picture of the city council, particularly in relation to our governance, financial management and relationship with our partners. As discussed at Cabinet last week, we will consider all the points set out in the peer review including recommendations in relation to governance.”

Question 9

Councillor Young to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:

“The recent peer review report notes: ‘There is a desire from some members for scrutiny to focus more on operational work areas. This view was also shared by officers who proactively want more scrutiny of their projects. Peers understand the scrutiny forward plan is developed through voting for subject and topic areas. Changing how the scrutiny forward plan is developed would need to be reviewed to influence a more joined up approach with officers.’ Green councillors have long advocated focussing scrutiny on the council’s operations, rather than wider issues that lie outside the council’s control. Recent discussion of county lines produced no recommendations, whereas the outvoted topic of the new anti-social behaviour strategy would have yielded helpful insight. How will the peer’s recommendation be taken forward, with scrutiny focussing on the delivery of services by the council, as it should with a strong leader model?”

Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:

“The recent LGA Peer Review paints a very positive picture of the city council, particularly in relation to our governance, financial management and relationship with our partners. As discussed at Cabinet last week, we will consider all the points set out in the peer review including recommendations in relation to scrutiny and actions from the peer review will be built into our refreshed Corporate Plan. I’m sure the Chair of Scrutiny will also have a view on how the committee’s work plan is developed.”

Question 10

Councillor Bogelein to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:

“As part of the 2021/22 internal audit plan, a review of the systems and controls in place within the NCSL contract was undertaken to confirm that they are operating adequately, effectively and efficiently. This included contract management arrangements. The audit received a **Limited Assurance** opinion over the controls operating within this area. Following the publishing of the LGA corporate peer review report, where it makes specific reference to the NCSL contract, and that there are “three managers within the council that undertake aspects of the client role which is leading to an inconsistent approach to contract management”, and recommends that this is “resolved urgently”, does the cabinet member agree with me that we must undertake another internal audit review of NCSL, which is focused on the governance arrangements and contract management for NCSL and our other wholly owned company NRL?”

Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:

“The Environmental Services audit you refer to concluded in 2022 and the report was considered by the Audit Committee in November 2022; although it was a limited assurance conclusion the report highlighted as good practice that “Contract Management Board meetings took place monthly in accordance with the contract”. There were no high priority recommendations although a medium priority recommendation was “To provide the Environmental Services team responsible for the day to day operation of the contract with refresher contract management training” – the report went on to note that this recommendation had been completed by the time the report was issued.

As you know the LGA Peer review has only just been published and we will of course take forward as appropriate any actions that flow from it accordingly.”

Question 11

Councillor Matthew Fulton-McAlister to ask the leader of the council the following question:

“Late last month I observed the Lord Mayor and Leader help the Unison City Branch launch their Love Unions week which promotes the benefits of trade unionism. For many years this council has developed an agenda which has sought to lead on both insourcing services and develop a constructive relationship with city trade unions around areas of mutual agreement. I was therefore struck by the potential impact of the governments Minimum Service Level Bill and the impact upon workers’ rights. Can the Leader comment on his thoughts around this and whether this could join others in condemning it?”

Councillor Waters, the leader’s response:

“Thank you very much for your timely question. Condemnation of the government’s minimum service levels bill (which I share) has been extensive. It has rightly been described by the Labour and trade union movement as “draconian” and a “vindictive assault” on basic freedoms. The legislation is being rushed through Parliament.

The TUC has strongly criticised the government over the lack of scrutiny the legislation has received. The union body has submitted a freedom of information request to uncover why the government published the bill without a required impact assessment – a decision that was called out by the regulatory policy committee, the independent watchdog that scrutinises new legislation.

The Labour party has also set out amendments that would require the government to submit the legislation to greater parliamentary scrutiny, including forcing the publication of assessments of how the bill would impact on individual workers, equalities, employers, and unions. Labour is committed to repealing the legislation when it is in Government.

Criticism is global. The TUC has received a series of letters of solidarity from unions around the world criticising the UK government over the legislation. Letters have been sent from unions in Algeria, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, France, Guatemala, Norway, Peru, Romania, and Spain.

International unions have also sent letters to British ambassadors condemning the legislation. In its letter to the British ambassador to Spain, the Unión Sindical Obrera (USO) expressed “deep concerns” about the bill, declaring: “Contrary to UK government claims, these measures would push the UK even further outside of international democratic norms.” A key government defence of the legislation has been that it would bring the UK “into line” with many other European nations, including Spain.

The reality is that we are living in an emerging authoritarian state. We have seen social and economic rights stripped away since 2010. Rights to protest have been restricted. Voter suppression legislation is in force and fundamental rights at work are now in jeopardy. What’s it all for – to defend the indefensible – a deeply inequal society.”

Question 12

Councillor Peek to ask the cabinet member for environmental services the following question:

“Fly-tipping remains a significant issue in some of parts of our city as the impact of the increased charges brought in by the County Council in 2017 remain a driver for this criminal offence, together with other factors. Despite this, I was reassured to learn that of the 5844 incidents of fly-tipping last year, 98% were resolved promptly, within 1 working day. As part of the wider Love Norwich campaign, can the cabinet member for environmental services comment on how the additional £100,000 invested through the recent budget can further enhance our communities to tackle this problem?”

Councillor Oliver, the cabinet member for environmental services’ response:

“The issue of fly-tipping is indeed an issue of considerable concern to the Council and whilst I am sure the charges you refer to have not helped this, it provides no excuse for those who fly tip. This is why we have developed our “Love Norwich” initiative aims tackle a range of environmental anti social behaviour, including fly-tipping, littering, dog fouling, and graffiti.

With regards to the £100K investment announced at the budget meeting on 21 February 2023, this will allow the council build on the recent engagement work that has taken place to encourage residents to take pride in their neighbourhoods. This next phase will allow us to install CCTV at fly tipping hotspots across the city, and use the video footage recorded to issue Fixed Penalty Notices to fly tippers and potentially prosecute the worst offenders. We are finalising the list of locations we will be targeting using the data we collect on an ongoing basis. Over the next 2 months we will be consulting with communities prior to installing the CCTV cameras, and once they are installed we intend to take robust action against offenders. Improved coordination and focus will be delivered through partnership working with colleagues across the Council and partner organisations.

I’m confident that the additional expenditure that we are able to provide due to our robust financial position will make a real positive impact on many communities across the city.”

Question 13

Councillor Vivien Thomas to ask the cabinet member for community wellbeing the following question:

“For many of my constituents, particularly those who do not have access to a large garden, the opportunity to enjoy their local park remains a real priority. Therefore, prioritising these, as evidenced through the recent budget last month, remains very important. Building on the investment in the new play equipment being installed in Wensum Park, discussed earlier this year, can the cabinet member for community wellbeing update council on the further wider environmental improvements being delivered to the park, working with the Norwich Fringe Project and other partners?”

Councillor Giles, the cabinet member for community wellbeing’s response:

“The council has received £80K from the Levelling Up Parks Fund to carry out environmental and biodiversity improvement works in Wensum Park. These works have now started, with further works programmed for later in the year.

The Norwich Fringe Project have been working with a number of partners to thin out and tidy the riverside scrub area and remove fallen trees, and address the antisocial behaviour that has unfortunately been taking place there.

Additional works include:

- Installation of a new footbridge, and replacement of the weir
- Drainage of the current pond and ornamental ditch
- Installation of a 1.2 m wide granite path, to link the footbridge with the tarmac path and providing disabled access across the site.
- Planting of 500 native species saplings providing seed ,fruit and nut to encourage biodiversity. The saplings will also be climate change resistant
- Ongoing management of the trees by coppicing to maintain clear sites lines, preventing anti social behaviour and increasing the age structure to the woodland to promote biodiversity.
- Introducing mature 12ft trees such as Bay Willow and Common Alder within the next six months, creating a more defined landscape feature to the site.
- Planting of a woodland wildflower seed mix which will produce bursts of colour including poppies and cornflowers, providing a nectar source for pollinators.

This extensive work will create a more welcoming environment within the park and support the council’s biodiversity objectives within its parks.”

Question 14

Councillor Kidman to ask the cabinet member for climate change and digital inclusion the following question:

“Fuel poverty is a top concern for many of my constituents and TUC analysis has found that energy bills will account for up to 10% of an average salary from next month, when the government’s energy price guarantee is due to rise from £2,500 to £3,000 a year for a typical household. Contained in the budget from last month were a range of positive steps this council will take to help tackle fuel poverty. Which are the top actions that the cabinet member for climate change and digital inclusion believes will make real difference to citizens in this city?”

Councillor Hampton, the cabinet member for climate change and digital inclusion’s response:

“Through our cost-of-living crisis response, we have significantly strengthened our support to residents affected by fuel poverty, directly through our own services, or by supporting our residents to access funding or services from our VCSE community. The support around fuel poverty includes offering emergency fuel payments, replacing end of life heating systems and the installation of double glazing and other energy efficiency measures. Our cost of living support goes beyond this, with help, for example, with food vouchers, support for social supermarkets, and support for advice charities.

Improving energy efficiency in our housing stock and housing stock across the city is ultimately the solution to reducing energy debt, improving living conditions and achieving net zero. The council recently announced the inclusion of £290m for improving energy efficiency and reducing emissions in our social housing to 2050, with £53m committed to be spend by 2028. We are currently delivering a £1.2m of Social Housing Decarbonisation project funds and are awaiting the imminent announcement of a further £4m of project funds under the same scheme. A separate procurement exercise is underway to deliver £5.3m of energy efficiency works through the government’s ECO4 scheme.

Our decarbonisation plans extend beyond our own housing stock, to the city as a whole. The council is proposing to lead and coordinate a citywide response to climate change which will see us move away from fossil fuels within a single generation, in accordance with the City Vision. This will be achieved by greatly improving the energy efficiency of homes of all tenures and transitioning to renewable forms of energy. We look forward to consulting on the full details of our Environmental Programme in the coming months.”

Question 15

Councillor Everett to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:

“The procurement of goods and services this council delivers makes a significant difference to the wider city and particularly its local economy and was discussed in detail at last month’s budget. Can the cabinet member for resources comment on this further?”

Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:

“Anyone who has had an opportunity to read the procurement strategy update that went to cabinet last week will quickly realise the scale of our local spending. Of nearly £370m of contracts that this council enters into, about £250m of those contracts are with suppliers based in the Norwich boundary. As I referenced at cabinet, when combined with our desire to support organisations pay the living wage this means we’re helping to secure good jobs in our local economy.

It’s not always the big scale contracts where we can have an impact. At cabinet we also saw the example of decoration vouchers, which we provide to new housing tenants to allow them to decorate their home to their own style. Whilst the scale of spending means, by law, we have to enter larger contracts which can be a barrier for the smallest firms, we have also agreed to continue a separate arrangement with Thorns DIY shop too. Using a risk-based approach, we have made our procurement rules easier in part to ensure local businesses are not put off bidding for work due to requiring them to make complex bids.

There is always more we can do; encourage our partners to maximise spend and look to use our spending power to drive the greatest social value to our communities but I am confident we are well placed to do so.”

Question 16

Councillor Driver to ask the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods the following question:

“Crime and anti-social behaviour have become an ever-greater problem in recent years, particularly with the damaging impact of County Lines and wider damage of losing thousands of police, all our PCSO’s in Norfolk and the erosion of services which often help to reduce re-offending. The response and role this council takes is therefore vital. Can the cabinet member for safe, strong, and inclusive neighbourhoods comment on the opportunities that the new community safety strategy, passed at cabinet last week, can offer communities across this city?”

Councillor Jones, the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods’ response:

“The need for a strategy was identified in the council’s corporate plan following the recently adopted Norfolk community safety strategy. The strategy will provide a clear vision of how we with partners and communities will look to tackle the causes and prevent crime and disorder holistically in Norwich. The strategy and new partnership that will be created will look to work at a local and neighbourhood level to tackle ASB, domestic abuse, crime and disorder issues contributing to helping people feel safer in their homes and communities. We will deliver this through an action plan developed with partners in the statutory, non-statutory and voluntary sector and listening to tenants and residents about what matters to them most in their communities to help them feel safe and secure.”

Question 17

Councillor Vaughan Thomas to ask the cabinet member for environmental services the following question:

“Last year I was proud to be one the councillors that voted in favour of the planning application to approve the development of seven new one-bedroom homes on Kett’s Hill to help former rough sleepers move forward with their lives, built on a piece of derelict land. It is often said, by all political parties that “the city council is committed to breaking the cycle of homelessness”, but this actually takes planning committee members with the guts and capacity to make decisions which put people first. Can the cabinet member for environmental services comment on progress with the development?”

Councillor Oliver, the cabinet member for environmental services’ response:

“Thank you for your question and planning committee’s support for this development. I was delighted to be invited to see the completed seven one-bed houses shortly before the new residents move in. The new homes have been built using modular, off-site manufacturing, with a timber frame, to ensure low embodied carbon and they all benefit from air-source heat-pumps. There is parking on site and each new home has its own small front and back gardens, as well as having easy access to Mousehold Heath.

This development is the second in a series of three new build projects across the city, specifically for rough sleepers. The first was a development of six flats which was completed in Dec 2021 at Lakenfields. The third is a development of 12 flats proposed in the west of the city, which has a funding allocation and will soon be submitted for planning. We’re also currently working on plans for a possible fourth bid later this year.

As well as the new build projects, we’ve secured funding for 15 open market housing purchases, and we’ve also made 15 Housing First improvements to properties already in our stock. Across the three funding programmes, we have now secured £2.6 million in capital towards build costs and just under £600,000 in revenue to fund support worker costs. Across all projects, we will be providing new homes to 55 individuals in desperate need of housing.

In recent years, due partly to these projects working alongside the excellent work of the pathways partnership, there has been a reduction in the number of entrenched rough sleepers in the city, bucking the national trend. Sadly, we still expect there will be people presenting as homeless, but it’s great that the people moving into these new homes are highly likely to break the cycle of rough sleeping in the long term. We’ve received incredibly positive feedback from the residents at Lakenfields who have had their lives completely transformed by having a safe and comfortable home to call their own.”

Question 18

Councillor Brociek-Coulton to ask the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods the following question:

“Representing a ward which has seen crime rocket in recent years, including burglary, I have long welcomed the City Council alley-gate program which offers residents the opportunity to have a strong metal gate fitted to their property. Can the cabinet member for safe, strong, and inclusive neighbourhoods comment on whether the symbolic figure of 100 properties protected have now been achieved?”

Councillor Jones, the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods’ response:

“Research, and experience from a previous scheme in Norwich, shows that alley gates are effective in reducing residential burglaries and protecting those shared communal spaces from anti-social behaviour. The alley gate scheme, funded and managed by the City Council is one important aspect of the Council efforts to help reduce crime and anti-social behaviour. Since the start of the scheme in 2020 we have installed thirty-one gates, improving security and feelings of safety for 142 households across Norwich. Residents feedback has been incredibly positive, confirming the real difference the scheme is making.”

Question 19

Councillor Huntley to ask the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth the following question:

“The site of the former 19th century lime kiln in Drayton Road, opposite Lime Kiln Mews, has been derelict for almost 20 years and remains both a significant eyesore but also a lost opportunity for potential social housing development. Stopping this site from being landbanked through using a Compulsory Purchase Order remains an opportunity for this council, as very successfully shown at the Kings Arms site. Can the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth comment further on this and other sites in the city?”

Councillor Stonard, the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth’s response:

“Thank you for the question. There are several sites across the city on which there has been no development activity for a number of years, this is sometimes due to physical constraints but may also be due to owners holding unrealistic expectations of their sites’ value. This means that several sites benefitting from a planning consent have lain idle for many years. In 2020 the council successfully obtained a Compulsory Purchase Order on the former site of the Kings Arms pub in Mile Cross which had lain derelict for years, attracting fly tipping and anti-social behaviour. The site is now occupied by five low-carbon council homes and is an example of the council using its powers to deliver much-needed housing to families.

Using this as a model the Council bid for and received government Towns Fund money in order to set up a Brownfield Sites Revolving Fund, with the intention of acquiring similarly stalled sites and putting them into valuable use. The council prefers to acquire such sites through negotiation but will consider using CPO where necessary.

The site opposite Lime Kiln Mews has indeed been vacant for many years. In December last year Cabinet approved the use of CPO powers on this site and one other in order to ensure that a route to development is in place in the event the owner fails to do it themselves. I can confirm that if the site is not developed by the owner within a reasonable period, the council will use its powers to ensure it is put to valuable use.

Officers are currently studying several sites around the city and will seek to acquire those they consider unlikely to be developed without its intervention”

Question 20

Councillor Mike Sands to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:

“In a matter of just a few weeks one of the most profound and anti-democratic measures, namely the introduction of compulsory Voter ID will take place for the local elections in May. Council leaders from across the country, including in Norwich, our local Member of Parliament Clive Lewis and CEO of the Association of the Association of Electoral Administrators have all criticised the policy. Will the cabinet member for resources comment on whether he feels sufficiently assured that support and resource from the government will be provided to ensure the elections are both democratic and successful?”

Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:

“On several occasions in this chamber we have made clear our strong feelings against the new laws requiring voters to produce ID at polling station. I am concerned that many residents may turn up on polling day without appropriate ID and feel disenfranchised from the vote.

The Council has received confirmation of its initial allocation from the government which includes specific funding to support accessibility in polling stations, something which we can welcome, but also to fund additional members of staff in polling stations to help with challenges and difficulties that can arise. We have also been informed by government that if we do incur additional costs we can make additional bids for funding either before or after the election.

Nonetheless, as much as we may regret it, this is now law and it is incumbent on us as a Council to do what we can to ensure residents are aware and bring their ID with them on polling day. I and the Leader have been engaging with the Returning Officer and elections on the various plans in place to make sure voters are aware, including promoting on social media, information with council tax bills and the citizen magazine and prominent messaging on poll cards. Whilst I may never be fully assured regarding the current government intentions, I am assured and confident in our very experienced elections team and us as a Council to do what we can to help our residents vote on 4 May.”

Question 21

Councillor Erin Fulton-McAlister to ask the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth the following question:

“I read with alarm that the national picture for retail predicted for 2023, thanks to the impact of the calamitous Conservative budget in September last year and the predicted deep recession this country will face, will be significant. However, shortly before Christmas the City Council result of the retail monitor survey carried out painted a different and much more positive picture within Norwich. Can the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth comment on this?”

Councillor Stonard, the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth’s response:

“Thank you for the question. The October 2022 retail monitor has shown that vacancy rates have fallen within the city centre (reduced from 14.5% in July 2021) to 12.2% and data from BID also shows that footfall has returned to pre pandemic levels.

The retail sector both nationally and within Norwich has experienced a lot of challenges in recent years brought about by changing consumer behaviour driven by technology and prevailing economic conditions and as a result of the pandemic. Whilst it is likely that these challenges will have ongoing impacts for the viability of some retail businesses, the past 12 months have shown just how resilient the majority of Norwich’s businesses are (especially Norwich’s independent businesses) and how successfully they have managed to recover. Whilst a number of multiples have ceased trading within Norwich, there is clearly investment happening with new businesses arriving.

As with all cities, Norwich faces an extremely uncertain time ahead. Whilst Norwich has recovered well from the impacts of the pandemic, rising costs and interest rates will impact both retailers and consumers. The City Council will continue to work with businesses and partners to make the City Centre an attractive destination and place for investment.

Hopefully future surveys will reveal further positive news.”

Question 22

Councillor Sue Sands to ask the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth the following question:

“Investing in our city centre, to continually drive and enhance its economic potential but also provide an inclusive and positive environment for all our citizens remains a vital priority for this administration. With work now soon underway to improve Hay Hill, can the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth comment on the opportunities this site offers to radically enhance this part of the city centre further?”

Councillor Stonard, the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable growth’s response:

“In July 2020 we published our public spaces plan for the city centre. It was based on the understanding of how important good public spaces are to the success of a city. They create civic pride, encourage business investment and nurture democracy.

The Plan outlined a series of projects that would continue the proud tradition of public space improvement that began with the pedestrianisation of London Street in 1967 and most recently led to the transformation of Tombland. Hay Hill is our next project and we have secured £3.2m from the Towns Fund for this project.

Hay Hill lies at the very heart of the city centre but it does not work well. The surfaces are cluttered and hard to maintain, the steps are complicated and prevent smooth movement and the sculpture of Sir Thomas Browne lacks the focus it deserves. The public expressed their clear support for change through a consultation last spring. One of the most powerful and important voices came from people with disabilities who explained how they struggled to navigate and negotiate the space.

We have listened to these concerns and the scheme we have designed will create more convenient and comfortable routes with edges and steps clearly delineated and lots of opportunity to sit down and rest. It will be a joyful space with planting that attracts nature and a water cascade that delights the senses, but it will also host events and drive much needed economic activity and investment in the heart of the city.”

Question 23

Councillor Padda to ask the cabinet member for environmental services the following question:

“Despite the government promising to eradicate rough sleeping by the end of this parliament, the numbers of people sleeping rough in the UK is going up yet again, with data from the autumn of 2022 showing a 23% rise on the total compared to the previous year. Shelter believes this is due to a toxic mix of rising rents, the cost-of-living crisis, and a failure to end no-fault evictions hitting vulnerable people. Will the cabinet member for environmental services comment on the situation in Norwich and the difference delivered by the services this City Council delivers?”

Councillor Oliver, the cabinet member for environmental services’ response:

“Nationally the number of people sleeping rough in England is 74% higher than in 2010 when recording by government started. We have bucked the trend seeing a decrease to 7 people recorded last autumn. Set against a backdrop of rising rents in the private sector and a cost-of-living crisis makes this achievement remarkable. The downward trend continued since the peak of 2016 when a high of 34 people were recorded on the annual count. Sadly, people still end up on our streets but now through the services delivered by the council’s housing options team and Pathways Norwich that is funded by the council we have a coherent and effective approach to tackling this form of homelessness. We can’t do this alone and we depend on working with agencies using a wraparound multi-agency approach around the person who needs our help and support to get their lives back on track”

Please note that the following questions are second questions from members and will only be taken if the time taken by questions has not exceeded thirty minutes. This is in line with paragraph 53 of Part 3 of the council's constitution.

Question 24

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

"I have been finding out more about the council's complaint process and discovered that, despite an optimistic self-assessment of compliance with the Housing Ombudsman's Code for Complaint Handling, the council does not have the necessary systems to monitor whether its processes do, in fact, comply with the code. This is evidenced by the majority of cases my colleagues and I have been working on, as well as at least two Housing Ombudsman rulings against the council for its failures to deal with damp/mould and failing to comply with its own complaints policy. Given that goodwill and endeavouring to comply with the code is not sufficient, how can we have confidence that the city council is meeting its obligations as a social landlord and has assessed the level of risk this will put the council under when more stringent rules for ensuring compliance are introduced with the Social Housing Regulations Bill?"

Councillor Harris, the deputy leader and cabinet member for social housing's response:

"The Housing Ombudsman refreshed their Complaints Handling Code in March 2022. All Registered Providers had to demonstrate compliance with the Code by completing an annual self-assessment by 1 October 2022.

There were 44 mandatory 'must do' requirements.

Following the implementation of the Council's new Complaints Policy last summer, the Council is compliant with the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code."

Question 25

Councillor Carlo to ask the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods the following question:

“In 2015 new Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) came in. Since 1 April 2018, landlords have been required to improve the energy performance certificate (EPC) rating of their properties to ‘E’ or above, unless exempted. My councillor enquiry shows 740 rented properties in Norwich still suffer the worst EPC ratings of F or G; forcing tenants to live in cold substandard conditions. I was informed that Norfolk County Council is responsible for enforcement. However, the Regulations state that the local authority is responsible for enforcing compliance with MEES in relation to domestic private rented property. Several districts are taking enforcement action against landlords who fail to insulate their properties to at least E rating. KL&WN Council has provided a webpage and online form enabling tenants to report a property which fails to meet the MEES. Will the council take enforcement action against private landlords who fail to comply with MEES?”

Councillor Jones, the cabinet member for safe, strong and inclusive neighbourhoods’ response:

The Council does take strong action against private landlords who fail to provide decent quality accommodation as the cases of St Faith’s Lane and St Peter’s House have demonstrated. It has produced the Norwich private renters’ charter to increase awareness of rights and raise expectations. It also often takes action against landlords where there is excessive cold and many of these will relate to properties that are rated F and G under MEES legislation.

The private rented sector has increased massively in recent years and resources available to police the sector have failed to keep pace. The Council is currently bringing forward a restructure of its planning and regulatory services and this will see increased resources being made available for the private sector housing team and further investment in technology to support them is also planned.

Following the restructure we will be engaging more fully with landlords of private rented accommodation, reminding them of the MEES legislation and their duties to comply with this and working to further update and strengthen the private renters’ charter .”