



**NORWICH**  
City Council

## **Cabinet**

**20 June 2023**

### **Questions to cabinet members**

#### **Question 1**

**Councillor Worley to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“In response to a question asked by Councillor Champion in September 2021 asking about a graffiti strategy for the city, the Cabinet Member said, “We do recognise the requirement for a joined-up approach and are examining the options for prevention, cleaning and enforcement in order to develop an effective long-term response to graffiti. Officers will be benchmarking performance at other councils, researching best-practice and working with NCSL to find the most efficient application of our resources in order to manage and reduce graffiti city-wide.” Can the Cabinet Member please tell us what progress has been made in the intervening two years, including stating when councillors and the public will be consulted on the graffiti strategy?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development’s response:**

“Officers have almost completed the tasks required to allow preparation of a draft strategy. Once complete, the draft will then be consulted on internally, prior to consulting with the council’s stakeholders by the end of September. We aim to have this process complete by the end of this year.”

## Question 2

**Councillor Osborn to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“The closure of the Lakenham post office is the latest loss of vital in-person services for the city, following the closure of banks such as the TSB branch on Magdalen Street and other post offices in Bowthorpe and – soon – Eaton. Can the Cabinet member explain how the council’s economic strategy for the city will respond to the loss of these services, for example by implementing a “meanwhile use” policy to ensure that high street units are kept in use and not left abandoned?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development response:**

“I share your concern about the closure of valued community services in our communities and am aware that members from across all parties have been active in campaigning for retention of such facilities.

It is disappointing to see that notwithstanding these efforts that the closure of banks and post offices is continuing. Unfortunately, the council does not have the power to prevent such local facilities leaving our high streets. Fortunately, Norwich is performing well compared to the national average when it comes to vacant units on the high street. The latest retail floorspace monitor shows that vacancy rates in Norwich are at 12.6% in the City Centre and 12.1% in district centres compared to the national average of 15.4%. Vacancy rates in Norwich have been decreasing since the pandemic. Our economic development team have in the past worked with organisations such as the Business Improvement District to encourage landlords to implement meanwhile uses and will keep this under review should vacancy rates worsen.”

### **Question 3**

**Councillor Schmierer to ask the leader of the council and the cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“The council has said that its reporting shows a 92.33% pass rate for street cleaning inspections in Mancroft Ward. However, many streets and estates in the ward, such as Cowgate, Canterbury Place, King Street, Lothian Street and others, are often filthy due to rubbish being left strewn across the street, and often broken glass or excrement as well. As Mancroft councillors, we have repeatedly encouraged residents to report this, however there seems to have been little improvement. Will the Cabinet Member review the frequency and quality of street cleaning in the city?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development's response:**

“The council uses a nationally recognised measurement system to measure the effectiveness of our street cleaning operations. Approximately 700 random inspections are carried out a year across the city, and the results are independently audited by the Association for Public Service Excellence. They also administer the inspection system on behalf of participating councils.

We are aware of the particular challenges at the locations identified, and we are working across the council and with Norwich City Services Limited to address these. In the meantime, we continually review our street cleaning schedules and are investing in new equipment to ensure the delivery of the quality of street cleaning expected by our residents.”

#### Question 4

**Councillor Galvin to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“As you know, the River Wensum is one of 27 catchments that are subject to Natural England's Nutrient Neutrality policy which has restricted developers building new homes within its catchment. This is meant to prevent increases in levels of problem chemicals like phosphates and put measures in place to mitigate the impact of new development. However, I have heard concerns shared among experts and a range of stakeholders that the process of deciding the best sites for mitigation projects means they are not being determined in the light of existing evidence for where they would make the best impact on the health of the river. Please could you explain what work is being done to identify solutions to avoid the danger of commodity brokerage trading rather than actually reducing the pollution in the river?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development's response:**

“Since the announcement of Natural England's (NE) nutrient neutrality restrictions for the Rivers Wensum and Yare last March there has been close cooperation between the affected Norfolk authorities to address nutrient neutrality to enable planning consents to be issued.

Royal Haskoning DHV were commissioned to prepare a Nitrate/Phosphate Mitigation Strategy for the catchment areas of the River Wensum and the Broads in Norfolk.. The study sets out a range of potential mitigation measures over the short, medium and longer term.

A Joint Venture (JV) has been established (Norfolk Environmental Credits Ltd) between four Norfolk authorities and Anglian Water. Norwich is not yet a member but is closely involved in its work with a view to joining once the business case is established. The JV is liaising closely with Natural England on its work.

Natural England is developing a Nutrient Mitigation scheme to enable developers to purchase 'nutrient credits' which will discharge the requirements to provide mitigation.

For the Wensum catchment the mitigation needs to be in place upstream/in the catchment of the point of impact of the development on the Special Area of Conservation (SAC), in particular the discharge point into the River Wensum of the wastewater treatment works that the development will connect to.

The work being undertaken to address nutrient neutrality in the Wensum and Broads catchments is based on specially commissioned evidence and mitigation will be locationally restricted for the Wensum. The JV takes a strategic approach to delivery of mitigation across a number of local authority boundaries and is not a commodity broker. Operation of the JV will be guided by the need to secure a trajectory of phosphorus and nitrogen reductions in line with projected development and its approach is consistent with NE's

advice on nutrient neutrality requirements for these catchments published in March 2022.”

## **Question 5**

**Councillor Champion to ask the cabinet member for communities and social inclusion the following question:**

“The council has confirmed that it has no plans for a “No Mow May” policy. In June 2022, the Cabinet Member stated that the council is “looking to ensure that the NCSL grass cutting programme is aligned with our emerging Biodiversity Strategy.” Considering the very severe loss of wildlife being faced in the ecological emergency, can the Cabinet Member please detail the council’s goals for grass-cutting programmes and how the impact on biodiversity will be monitored?”

**Councillor Giles, the cabinet member for communities and social inclusion’s safety’s response:**

“The council, further to the publication of its biodiversity strategy last autumn is currently undertaking a biodiversity baseline and opportunities study, which is due to be completed over the summer. This will provide up to date information of the species and habitats that are under pressure in the city and how we may best go about conserving and enhancing them. It will also identify the opportunities we have for improvement of biodiversity so we can target our resources effectively.

In the meantime, there are many areas across the city that we do not cut at various times of the year in accordance with best horticultural practice. These include naturalised bulb areas, and areas that have previously been identified as being able to promote biodiversity in other ways.

Not all grassed areas are suitable for this type of maintenance. Much of our amenity grass contains species that are fast growing and have low biodiversity value. Stopping cutting for extended periods can be counter-productive, as more resources are required to tidy up the grass after it is eventually cut. In addition, if this tidy up work is carried out incorrectly, it can result in longer term damage to these areas.”

## **Question 6**

### **Councillor Calvert to ask the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety the following question:**

“Many tenants and leaseholders have reported that council sheds have fallen into disrepair, and when they have reported the need for repairs, these have not been carried out in a timely or an effective way. For example, sheds at Bargate Court have not been repaired after a fire several years ago. The council does not track how many requests for repair result in repairs being carried out or not, and is unable to provide the number of repair orders that are outstanding for repairs to sheds. What action is the Cabinet Member taking to get on top of the lack of tracking of repairs, so that tenants can get their sheds repaired and use them at last?”

### **Councillor Jones, the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing and community safety’s response:**

“Historically repairs to sheds were reported using a generic communal block reference code and so we are unable to extract detailed data to answer this question. All works are raised using NEC and the individual orders can be tracked until it is completed, with customers able to do this independently by using their account on the website, monitoring the work through to completion.

Sheds are not classed as habitable spaces, therefore, most repair work will fall within either our 60 working day time frame or into future programme of works. The exception to this is where the issue presents an immediate health and safety risk, which are then actioned accordingly.

A Senior Building Surveyor will be attending Bargate Court to inspect the sheds to assess condition and review current plans to repair.”

## Question 7

**Councillor Hoechner to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“In 2021, Scrutiny heard evidence from air quality experts demonstrating that, as has become very apparent through many scientific studies recently, burning wood of any kind, even in a so-called “eco stove”, causes toxic air pollution. The scrutiny committee recommended that the council undertake a communications campaign on this issue. A recent tweet for Clean Air Day stated that “if you have a wood-burning fire or stove in your home, this #CleanAirDay learn how to ease the #AirPollution impact: only burn dry, well-seasoned or “Ready-to-Burn” labelled wood; or use smokeless fuel.” It did not recommend not burning wood at all. While the council’s communication has warned that burning wood in any form causes toxic pollution, it has never recommended not burning wood. Does the Cabinet Member agree that people should be encouraged not to burn wood wherever possible?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development’s response:**

“While the price of electricity and gas remains so expensive, an increasing number of our residents are unable to heat their homes through the winter.. For those that already have a log burner or an open fire, the more affordable price of burning wood can be a lifeline.

In this context, the council has highlighted the risks of burning wood in the home, but we recognise that the choice to not burn wood isn’t available to everyone trying to heat their home during a cost-of-living crisis. By providing the guidance from Defra on compliant fuels we can limit the health impacts when people do burn wood at home.

In terms of enforcement, we can only use the legislation available to us and have no power to ban people using log burners or open fires. The Environment Act 2021 relates to what can be burned and defines smoke control areas, while the Environmental Protection Act 1990 relates to nuisance from smoke.”



## **Question 8**

### **Councillor Catt to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:**

“For the second year in a row, we have seen the cancellation of the July full council meeting. Shortly after hearing this news, I had to respond to a resident who had asked for support to ask a question of the council, to tell them that their opportunity had been taken away from them, and that even their representatives would not be able to ask questions of the council until September, making it three months where the council will have no public scrutiny. While questions can be asked at Cabinet, this does not meet what the public expect in terms of the accountability offered by Full Council. I understand there is no official business to be discussed, but surely this means that we have more time to scrutinise and hold the council to account. How can the cancellation of this public meeting be squared with basic democratic principles?”

### **Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for communities and social inclusion’s response:**

“I would like to think that whilst the public rightly expect accountability from elected Councillors, they also expect efficiency and not to incur inefficient time and resources involved in meeting when there is no formal business to conduct, it was in this context that the Lord Mayor made the decision to cancel Council in July. It is perhaps a shame that you didn’t highlight to the member of the public that you refer to in your question, the opportunity to ask a question here, in an open public meeting that is being broadcast on YouTube, the very same opportunity you have taken in asking your question. If any members of the public have questions, they are also very welcome to contact myself, other members of Cabinet or any other elected Councillor directly, whether by phone or e-mail, where I’m sure they would happily respond, which is all part of the open and efficient democratic system we operate in.”

## **Question 9**

**Councillor Fox to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:**

“In my work as a community connector in Mancroft, one of the things that people frequently raised was the lack of free or affordable meeting space for community groups. Since being elected I have noticed that much of the space in City Hall is unused for some of the time. Does this council agree that allowing community groups, who are often supporting the work of the council, to use these rooms would be a better use of resource than having them stand empty?”

**Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:**

“Whilst we would want to maximise every opportunity to support local groups, offering meeting room space requires a significant resource commitment, from organising access to managing health and safety and compliance requirements. We are currently able to support and manage specific City Hall events but are unable to provide wider access for meeting room space. The use of meeting room space at City Hall, for community groups or local charities, is something that we will incorporate into considerations for the future, sustainable use of the building.

## **Question 10**

**Councillor Young to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“I note that the council’s Development Management policies state: “Appropriate consideration should be given to orienting development in order to optimise energy efficiency and maximise solar gain”. However, some architects I have spoken to seem to suggest that council officers have objected to solar panels going onto roofs in conservation areas. I am very sympathetic to the desire to cherish and enhance Norwich’s historic buildings, but this cannot be done at the expense of the environment and in my opinion the fitting of solar panels on buildings should be actively encouraged wherever possible to indeed optimise energy efficiency and maximise solar gain. Does the cabinet member agree to ensure that new developments in particular have as many solar panels as possible to provide occupants with greener energy?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development’s response:**

There are no examples from the past five years where the Council has refused consent for solar panels in the Conservation Area. As with most planning matters, assessing proposals for renewable energy that affect heritage assets is about striking the balance between the benefits of renewable energy and any harm that may be caused to the asset. The Council’s Design and Conservation Officers will always work constructively with those who are willing to engage with them to come up with solutions to the adaptation of heritage assets to meet the challenges of modern times.”

## **Question 11**

**Councillor Haynes to ask the leader of the council and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development the following question:**

“Across the city there is a problem with fly-tipping. This is not something new sadly, but it seems to be particularly prevalent in areas where there are communal bins. However, if these communal bins are locked away so that only local residents have access to them, the problem seems to dissipate. Where they are open and can be used by everyone they seem to attract bulky items and are often overflowing. Can the cabinet member commit to ensuring that any future council houses that are built with communal bins are ones that are locked away and can only be accessed by the residents for whom they are intended and similarly can they commit to investigating how practical it would be to have locked storage facilities built in existing communal bin sites?”

**Councillor Stonard, the leader and cabinet member for inclusive and sustainable development’s response:**

“Norwich City Council is committed to building social housing, as can be seen from our ongoing development at Mile Cross and Threescore. All developments are subject to viability tests, and we always seek to ensure communal spaces are well managed and maintained, however, in both terms of cost and planning requirements we cannot make this an absolutely commitment but will add this to our design principles.”

## **Question 12**

**Councillor Price to ask the cabinet member for resources the following question:**

“Since the abolition of the Audit Commission, up and down the country we have seen increased delays to the completion of the external auditing of Local Authorities, and an increase in the fees charged. Norwich has not been immune to the situation. This is resulting in unnecessary resource pressures on our finance team, who continue to deliver on time and to high standards. Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that the selling of auditing contracts to the big four auditors has failed, and will he write to the Leader of the Labour Party of the United Kingdom to ascertain if he will re-establish a publicly owned independent auditing body if elected to govern?”

**Councillor Kendrick, the cabinet member for resources’ response:**

“I agree that the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition Government’s decision to abolish the Audit Committee in 2015 was a mistake and that the present external audit regime for Local Government is not fit for purpose. As to its replacement, I prefer to work within the LGA Labour Group which is working closely with frontbench shadow ministers on this and other issues dealing with Local Government, including that relating to future audit arrangements. This will have more impact, in my opinion than indulging in the gesture politics of just writing a letter to the leader of opposition.”