



# **NORWICH** City Council

## **COUNCIL**

**28 June 2011**

### **Questions to Cabinet Members and Committee Chairs**

#### **Question 1**

##### **Councillor David Fairbairn to the cabinet member for housing:-**

Recently, the Labour leader has suggested that council tenants who do voluntary work of social value could be given priority on the housing waiting lists. He cited the example of Manchester, where being in work, or making a contribution to the community, earn you points. Has any consideration ever been given to this type of system for Norwich?

##### **Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for housing's reply:-**

The Greater Norwich sub-region is an area of extremely high demand for social housing and our policy has to reflect this. The guiding principle of current sub-regional policy, to which we are committed, is to award priority to those individuals and families in the greatest housing need. As such priority is currently based on an applicant's housing circumstances. The sub-regional policy is kept under review but as far as I am aware, no local consideration has been given to the type of approach outlined in the question.

It is also worth noting, that no matter how admirable such a concept is, it will carry a cost implication which would be difficult to justify at this time.

I am very aware of, and admire, the excellent contribution volunteers can and do make, in relation to our management of the council housing stock. I am satisfied that the principle of putting those in greatest need first is appropriate in the local context.

#### **Question 2**

##### **Councillor Judith Lubbock to the cabinet member for play, parks and open spaces:-**

The fountain in Eaton Park lies under a green tarpaulin and has done so for over a year now. The tiles covering the dome of the fountain are cracked and dangerous. I am told that the cost of replacing the tiles with non-slip ones and ones that do not crack is £36,000. Please could the cabinet member say if the sum of £36,000 for renovation is correct? Will the council pay for the renovation? If it is the council's responsibility to finance the renovation could the cabinet member give some assurances that the public will have a say in how money is spent in bringing this

fountain back into use, especially if residents want a more traditional fountain replacement like the original one.

**Councillor Deborah Gihawi, cabinet member for play, parks and open spaces reply:-**

The fountain in Eaton Park was commissioned as a piece of artwork, as part of the £4.2m Heritage Lottery funded programme of improvements to our historic parks. The aim of the project was to reinstate the water feature in the centre of the rose garden, with a new contemporary design, as a focal point for the garden.

Since its installation, it has become a piece of interactive art with children enjoying walking across the wet dome. Unfortunately, the tiles started to weather resulting in the tiles flaking as a consequence.

As the fountain was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund any changes made to features in the park need to be approved by them. Discussions have been held with HLF and it has been made clear to the council that removal of the water feature would have to be the very last option available. In relation to the cost of the work, which falls to the city council, an initial estimate of £36,000 was made. However, further investigation has shown that the repair work can be undertaken for less than this sum. The final price will be determined by a competitive tender process. However, as we are facing the most severe cuts to local authority expenditure since the 1920's, clearly we will be looking for a solution which will provide the best value for money and deliver a facility that enhances the park.

**Question 3**

**Councillor Samir Jeraj to the cabinet member for environment and neighbourhoods:-**

In 2010 Full Council set aside £40,000 to support participatory budgeting which was unspent due to the September elections. Will this funding be used in this year to support the recommendations of the cross-party Participatory Budgeting task and finish group?

**Councillor Julie Westmacott, cabinet member for environment and neighbourhoods:-**

The council is having to address a significant reduction in revenue grant from central government. To do this all areas of expenditure are under review and in some areas it has been necessary to hold back investment to address the funding shortfall. Therefore the response to a similar question in January of this year explained that the public sector funding reductions imposed by Government has resulted in a significant savings requirement for the Council with these savings being front loaded.

The need to control and hold back spending as part of a financially prudent approach resulted in the funding for participatory budgeting being put on hold until the Council's financial picture became clearer.

The level of budget reductions that the Council are being forced to make is severe and a public consultation on a range of options to achieve these budget reductions will be start in July and extend over the summer period. As a consequence it is necessary to hold back on this expenditure until the outcome of the consultation process is known.

Notwithstanding this, the cabinet is committed to empowering residents and will continue to explore other sources of funds and alternative approaches that might be used to enable communities to become involved in spending decisions in their area and builds the capacity of residents at the same time. The council is having to address a significant reduction in grant from Central Government. To do this all areas of expenditure are under review and in some areas it is not possible to do all the things we wish to do.

#### **Question 4**

##### **Councillor Ash Haynes to the cabinet member for planning and transport:-**

Does the Council support the recommendations by Friends of the Earth and the Citizens Advice Bureau to strengthen the current Energy Bill and help tackle fuel poverty and climate change by: bringing forward the date for private rented homes to meet the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standard from 2018 to 2016; gradually raising the Minimum Standard after 2016; and giving legal protection from eviction to tenants who demand energy efficiency measures from landlords?

##### **Councillor Bert Bremner, cabinet member for planning and transport's reply:-**

As you will well know and acknowledge, the City Labour administration has a long standing commitment to, and sound track record of tackling, the problem of poorly insulated housing. Therefore bringing forward the date would fit in perfectly with our approach and gradually raising the minimum standard which will lift the requirement above the basic avoidance of 'excess cold' is also something one would hope all councils would support. Clearly this would be a good for tenants' health and economic well-being.

However it may also pose some practical challenges since the average privately-owned dwelling in Norwich falls within band E and improving it beyond that could be difficult, especially in hard-to-treat solid-wall properties. This could potentially also have some detrimental impact on the private rental market and could require extra enforcement resources for properties that, currently, meet minimum standards.

Providing protection from eviction is, again, good in principle because it avoids 'retaliatory' eviction, although it may have the unintended consequence of a reduction in available privately-rented dwellings in the run-up to the measures being brought in as landlords leave the market.

The key to the effectiveness of the proposed changes will be how they are introduced and in particular the enforcement powers. It will help that councils will be able to take action without having to prove an excess cold hazard. However, councils will need to know where the failing properties are, which implies that they will need to be notified when a sub-standard energy performance certificate is produced for a rented property. Council's won't necessarily know that a private property is being let, though, so in practice this will only be fully effective if a form of landlord registration scheme is introduced alongside it. You will recall that this was a measure which the previous government was going to introduce but which the Tory led coalition removed. Without such a register councils will have to wait until a tenant notifies them and not all tenants feel confident enough to do that.

## **Question 5**

### **Councillor Bob Gledhill to the cabinet member for planning and transport:-**

A nationwide system of 'carbon budgets' would support and empower every local authority not only to measure their carbon emissions and set a reduction target, but would also ensure that councils fully involve local people and businesses in developing green policies and implementing the plans. Will the city council join other local authorities in signing up to the Local Government Offer on Climate Change to Secretary of State, Chris Huhne, calling for the Government to establish a 'coherent and coordinated approach to tackling climate change between local and national government' by introducing legislation for local carbon budgets?

### **Councillor Bert Bremner, cabinet member for planning and transport's reply:-**

I am glad for the chance to spell out this Labour administration's support the principle of "carbon budgets".

We support the intentions set out in the Local Government Offer on Climate Change calling for the Government to establish a 'coherent and coordinated approach to tackling climate change between local and national government' by introducing legislation for local carbon budgets.

Although we all need to note that there are several ways of calculating carbon budgets and even amongst experts there seems to be some difference of opinion as to which is the best way.

However, we believe that it is absolutely essential that any system of local carbon budgets must not place onerous duties on local authorities in regards to monitoring arrangements.

As you must finally be aware of the financial pressures the council faces brought on by the Lib-Dem / Tory government cuts, you need to understand that we want to ensure that the limited resources we have in this area are focused, as they are now, on reducing carbon emissions rather than getting wasted supporting complex systems of monitoring and government reporting.

## **Question 6**

### **Councillor Ruth Makoff to the cabinet member for housing:-**

How does the council plan to tackle the significant delays to the kitchen upgrade programme which are still ongoing, nine months after the collapse of Connaught?

### **Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for housing's reply:-**

The kitchen upgrade programme is a political priority for the Labour group and it is an issue which we know is important to tenants. The council has appointed Lovell to undertake the kitchen and bathroom upgrades programme. This is an interim contract pending the completion of the next stage in the procurement process. I am pleased to report that Lovell are currently installing new kitchens and bathrooms across the city and by September they will be delivering the work in accordance with the previously agreed spend profile and delivery schedules. The backlog will be cleared at that stage.

## **Question 7**

### **Councillor Lesley Grahame to the cabinet member for resources:-**

Norfolk County Council has adopted a policy of disposing of so-called 'surplus assets'. The council intends to sell the freehold on these properties at market value, thus precluding the very community groups which the coalition government claims to be empowering. Can we be assured that if the city council decides to dispose of publicly-owned assets, that every attempt will be made to ensure those properties will continue to be available for community benefit?

### **Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources reply:-**

The council is presently developing an asset management strategy which it is planned to consider at the July cabinet. The emerging strategy acknowledges strengths and areas of good practice. However the council has a large property portfolio ranging from offices, parks, community facilities, investment properties etc, and there are a variety of challenges in ensuring it is managed to best meet the council's corporate needs. An area of development is to determine policies which address the potential disposal of assets to community groups, not least given the previous and now the coalition Government's interest in this area.

As Councillor Grahame may be aware the Government is taking steps to enhance the ability of community groups to take on assets through the Localism Bill. Specifically the Bill will require local authorities to define community assets; those it owns and those owned by other parties, and if there is a proposal to dispose of that asset, the act would give community groups a right to bid for community assets, whether they are publicly or privately owned. The council's approach to disposal of

assets to community groups will need to be informed by the provisions in the new legislation.

In recent years the council has focussed on the disposal of under performing investment assets and other development land. In this context, I would like to challenge the implication that selling assets at market value is necessarily not in the interests of the community. Firstly the market value is only a reflection of the advantages and disadvantages associated with a property. With often little scope for alternative use and therefore little interest by the commercial sector, market values may be modest. Therefore in themselves such values are not automatically an impediment to purchase by a community group. Secondly, the council needs to be mindful of its fiduciary responsibilities and a need to act on behalf of council tax payers in general. Given this wider responsibility, to dispose of assets at anything other than market value would be difficult to justify unless there was a very clear public interest in doing otherwise. Clearly many of these assets are of little interest to community groups. Finally it is important to note that income from the disposal of surplus assets is reinvested in capital schemes that benefit the community including environmental enhancement works and affordable housing.

#### **Question 8**

##### **Councillor Lucy Galvin to the leader of the council:-**

The In Harmony project run by NORCA has had its funding from central government cut recently. What is the Council doing to support this excellent project, which benefits some of the most disadvantaged children in the city?

##### **Councillor Brenda Arthur, leader of the council's reply:-**

The city council has had a long and positive relationship with NORCA the organisation that deliver In Harmony and other cultural projects. NORCA has worked closely with us on the Lord Mayors celebration, helping us to develop carnival projects in the local community. They receive a grant from the council for this work and were one of our major partners in our bid to become UK city of culture.

In Harmony however, takes place in schools and sadly we are not responsible for education budgets or the schools music service. This clearly resides with the County Council.

I too regret this project's funds have been cut and I know officers here are aware of the situation. However we do not have budgets we can use for this purpose. We have offered other forms of support to NORCA and always willing to talk to local groups who are making a real difference in our communities but have to do so in the context of facing the worst cuts to local authority funding in over 90 years.

## **Question 9**

### **Councillor Claire Stephenson to the cabinet member for resources:-**

In the past year, several members of the public have been ejected from council meetings across the UK for filming and broadcasting the meeting. Can the cabinet member assure me that Norwich City Council fully supports the freedom of the press and access to the democratic process, so would welcome members of the public filming our public meetings?

### **Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources reply:-**

I have a good deal of sympathy for the sentiments expressed in this question. However, a decision to allow or not to allow filming of the proceedings of a council meeting is not a straightforward one. There are a number of issues that would need to be worked through before the council decides if it is appropriate to allow such filming.

There is no statutory or common law right to film public meetings but there may be data protection issues to take into consideration including, for example, re other members of the public attending and council officers. The affect on wider participation would also need to be considered. There is, for example, a possibility that allowing filming may lead to a range of people who may not wish to be filmed, recorded or photographed, being discouraged from taking part themselves, creating an environment that actually discourages public involvement.

If filming is to be allowed, consideration would need to be given to whether filming should be stopped when someone wants to speak who doesn't want to be filmed. If so does the chair make that decision and what affect would this have on the running of the meeting if it happened regularly.

If filming is to be allowed it would seem appropriate to put signs in place before a meeting starts, to inform attendees that filming/ recording/ photography will be taking place, that it is by a third party and that the Council has no control over where it may appear (for example posted on the internet). Intentional or unintentional editing of the film could be used to embarrass attendees or to mislead the public on what actually happened.

These are just some of the issues that need to be considered. Ultimately it would be a matter for the Constitution working party to consider all the implications and make a recommendation to Council on any amendment to the constitution, including appropriate protocols to be followed.

## **Question 10**

### **Councillor Graeme Gee to the cabinet member for resources:-**

In the light of Councillor Waters' recent statements in the press, can this council afford to rely on a single contractor to deliver a housing maintenance contract worth 40 to 60 million pounds over a five year period?

### **Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources reply:-**

The council has adopted a procurement strategy for housing services that means a number of contractors are or will be providing these services. The procurement strategy aims to balance obtaining value for money with managing the risk of contractor failure. The council has adopted a strategy for services and works for housing with the result that a number of contracts will be spread across a number of suppliers. By way of example gas servicing is now provided by local contractor Gasway, window replacements are due to be provided by Anglian Windows and a series of structural repairs are shortly due to be awarded to two separate contractors. The total value of these contracts is around £5 million p.a. Further contracts for example for planned upgrades such as kitchens and bathrooms and another for electrical and mechanical maintenance will form separate contracts which will be tendered shortly.

## **Question 11**

### **Councillor Adrian Holmes to the cabinet member for resources:-**

Given that council officers said all current contracts would be monitored in house, will the new housing maintenance contract be monitored in the same way, without the use of consultants?

### **Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources reply:-**

Consultants are not used for this kind of work. The new housing maintenance contracts will be monitored in house by our officers. The current and future housing maintenance contracts are monitored at two levels. Firstly at an operational level officers and the contractor meet for discussions, normally on a weekly basis, to monitor performance against budget, and resolve any day to day type issue.

Secondly, at a strategic level, officers and the contractor will review key elements of the contract such as programming, priorities, financial performance and other high level service delivery matters. All of this contract monitoring work is undertaken by council staff.



## **Question 12**

### **Councillor Jo Henderson to the cabinet member for planning and transport:-**

As the council has an ongoing relationship with the Homes and Communities Agency, in partnership with housing associations, will this council be committed to the HCA condition of Affordable Rents (that is up to 80% of market rents)? If this is the case, and considering that the only social housing likely to be built in the medium term in Norwich is in partnership with the housing associations, will all future nominations gained by this council from the sale of land to housing associations be under the 'Affordable Rent' condition?

### **Councillor Bert Bremner, cabinet member for planning and transport's reply:-**

The highest level of housing need in Norwich is for social rented property and this is our preferred approach. The Lib-Dem / Conservative Government has a stated preference for "Affordable Rents" which is 80% of the local market rent which is much higher than social rents.

The council's ground breaking strategic partnership with the HCA will result in the delivery, over the next 12 months, of 108 new homes in Norwich. These will be let at social rent, a rent which people on low incomes can afford rather than at the Coalition Government's so called "Affordable Rent."

However, because of the constraints which the Tory led coalition has put on borrowing and its link to rent setting the cabinet has also recently agreed to proceed with development on four existing sites on the basis of "affordable rent". This is because the development process for these sites had reached an advanced stage before the coalition government's changes to the funding regime were introduced. Failure to proceed would have left the vacant sites vulnerable to anti-social behaviour. Also, as we have said on many occasions, we need more homes in Norwich.

Funding options for the future will be considered as part of the review of the 'Delivering Affordable Housing Partnership' (DAHP) which is currently underway. As we know the Lib-Dem and Conservative Government's changes have limited the options available for letting new homes at social rent levels.

However, there may be ways to develop new sites that do not rely on grant funding from the HCA. You can be sure that the Labour administration will be considering all options before any decisions about how we further develop new houses on our own land is made.

## **Question 13**

### **Councillor Stephen Little to the cabinet member for environment and neighbourhoods:-**

Locations in the city which suffer from persistent fly-tipping could benefit by the installation of signage or temporary CCTV. Yet the council is reluctant to do this on

grounds of cost. Notwithstanding the blight that fly-tipping represents for some of our communities, what evidence has the council that taking such measures will not save money in the long run by reducing the ongoing need to repeatedly clear up flytipping?

**Councillor Julie Westmacott, cabinet member for environment and neighbourhoods reply:-**

Faced with the need to make significant reductions in the revenue budget the council is reviewing all areas of expenditure and this includes seeking long term solutions to problems with fly tipping. In this context, I am pleased to report that over the last three years the number of fly-tipping incidents across the city has decreased from a high of 7,472 incidents in 2004/05 to 5,378 in 2010/11. To achieve this the action taken so far includes:

- the introduction of a quick reaction team within the contract to remove any fly-tipping found on council land,
- problem solving with residents through neighbourhood working,
- holding fly-tipping awareness weeks to raise awareness,
- hot spot mapping to identify areas where we can best utilise our resources,
- high profile prosecution cases.
- Joint working with other agencies including the Environment Agency and the Police taking action against rogue traders carrying waste without appropriate waste carriers license and waste transfer notes

By focussing on more effective and efficient use of resources, the council has contributed to a significant drop in the number of fly-tipping incidents across the city. The key to prevention of fly-tipping is getting an area clean and keeping it clean. The use of signage and temporary CCTV which can incur a significant cost does not in itself solve the problem of fly-tipping; it is about removing the opportunity for people to do it. To do this needs the help of everyone including our residents, landlords, visitors, contractors, officers and outside agencies. I would urge residents to get in touch with our customer contact and neighbourhood teams to report such issues so speedy action can be taken.

I recognise the blight that fly-tipping brings to an area and so intend to build on the success outlined above so that we continue to reduce the number of fly-tipping incidents over the coming years.

**Question 14**

**Councillor Jo Storie to the cabinet member for housing:-**

Will the portfolio holder please give an update on the work of the LEAP project in Norwich?

**Councillor Victoria MacDonald, cabinet member for housing's reply:-**

The LEAP project was launched in April 2009 using external funding awarded to the council by the Department of Communities and Local Government in recognition of the high performance of our housing options team and the department's 'trailblazer' status in the provision of enhanced housing options to clients in housing need.

The project arose from recognition that homelessness and worklessness are inextricably linked and a desire to provide support services that take these two issues into account. The project aims to help the most vulnerable and socially excluded clients within the city's hostels access settled accommodation, training and employment.

While the original tranche of funding has now ended, I am pleased to report that a bid to the 'Big Lottery fund' has been successful and the council has been awarded £311,000 with which to continue the project over the next three years. Norwich City Council is recognised as one of the leading authorities in our working with and for people who are homeless, sleeping rough or in supported accommodation; it is pleasing that the Big Lottery has acknowledged this by funding this important and innovative provision.

Working in partnership with St Martins Housing Trust, the project will expand to provide a bigger and better service, incorporating voluntary work opportunities, a work placements project and an accredited mentor support program. This will provide an even more person centred approach to help young people move forward and achieve their aspirations.

**Question 15**

**Councillor James Wright to the cabinet member for resources:-**

In an article in the Norwich Evening News on June 3 entitled "Councils dismiss India jobs idea", the cabinet member for resources stated of offshoring that "It's a bad thing and it would take jobs out of the local economy as well as being questionable in terms of effective customer service. The important thing for us is to play our part in preserving jobs in the city and helping other companies do the same."

Could he please provide me with details of any Council services, either internal or customer facing, that are routinely provided by staff who are based outside of Norfolk.

**Councillor Alan Waters, cabinet member for resources reply:-**

The majority of services whether internal or customer facing are provided by staff based within Norfolk. The contracts with the largest numbers of employees such as housing maintenance, upgrades and gas servicing, street cleansing, grounds maintenance, waste and recycling collection, ICT services, building cleaning, repairs and maintenance to council buildings and leisure centre management to name but a few all use staff based within Norfolk. With these services there are hundreds of staff who are fully employed on delivery of services for the council. Naturally there

will be some services where there are staff based outside of Norfolk such as the payroll service but in this case there is only one person mainly engaged on delivering services to the council. There are other services where a member of staff is based outside of Norfolk but visit to carry out services on an infrequent basis such as an annual service to a lift where the member of staff may cover the eastern region and may be based in another county such as Suffolk or Cambridgeshire for example. The IT helpdesk provided by Steria (an international company) is located in Poland. However, this helpdesk has never been located in Norfolk but a majority of the Steria staff are – including many based in city hall.

The specific context for the press interview referred to in councillor Wright's question relates to a decision by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat administration in Birmingham ( they waited until after the local elections) to be the first council in the country to outsource part of their direct workforce abroad.

I hope Councillor Wright would share my view that this approach, with its direct cost to local communities, in terms of employment and impact on the local economy is completely unacceptable.