

Cabinet
2 October 2023
Questions

	Member question and response
7.1	<p>Question from Councillor Saul Penfold It was reassuring to hear at last week's Full Council meeting that the administration is confident issues around equal pay that saw Birmingham issue a Section 114 Notice and is now threatening the same fate at Sheffield City Council, does not threaten the finances of Norfolk County Council. Has the administration conducted any assessment into potential historical disputes/issues that could, similar to events in the aforementioned authorities, directly threaten this Council's ability to deliver a balanced budget and maintain its statutory services?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance Officers have undertaken an assessment of the equal pay claims that have occurred in Birmingham and other Councils. NCC use a nationally recognised job evaluation scheme and have a robust process in place to apply this scheme in a way that is fair to all. Our current assessment of risk is very low but we will continue to watch and learn from new cases.</p>
7.2	<p>Question from Cllr Brian Watkins Can the leader of the council commit to members that the main motivation of Norfolk's Devolution Deal is to benefit the people of Norfolk through new investment, and is not simply motivated by the need to close the budget gap?</p> <p>Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategy and Governance Thank you for your question.</p> <p>A Level 3 Devolution Deal for Norfolk would see an investment of £600m of new money over a 30-year period. This money does not and cannot replace core funding and will be used to grow our economy, working with our District colleagues and other partners. It will be used to support local businesses and attract businesses to move to our county, creating jobs and to help develop and diversify skills in Norfolk.</p> <p>Second question from Cllr Brian Watkins You recently decided to scrap the transport for Norwich Advisory Committee, turning it into little more than a meaningless talking shop. This is an affront to local democracy as well as being utterly disrespectful to council colleagues on other neighbouring authorities. With ongoing public concern about the changes now taking place at the heartsease roundabout, will the chair now concede that this is absolutely the wrong time to take matters behind closed doors?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport The previous iteration of this body was dysfunctional, being made inquorate by members refusing to take part and depriving the Cabinet Member of advice to assist his timely decision making.</p> <p>The new steering group reflects the well- functioning arrangements of Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn, which have operated successfully for many years.</p>

7.3	<p>Question from Councillor Steffan Aquarone Will the cost of rent for use of the new recycling centre located in Sheringham exceed £19,000 per year?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste The full detail (including comparable detail about the proposed replacement for Wymondham Recycling Centre) is available in a report to Cabinet dated 31 January 2022. This clarified that if the proposed development of the new Sheringham Recycling Centre went ahead then the term of the lease would be 25 years from the point at which the works contract was confirmed, with break points at 15 and 20 years and a rent of £20,000 a year subject to rent reviews every five years indexed to the Retail Price Index, but with fixed annual cap and collar between 2% and 4%.</p>
7.4	<p>Question from Cllr Alison Birmingham Can the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport explain how work is able to commence on the Heartsease Roundabout when the land required for the project has not yet been purchased?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport These are very small areas of land that do not compromise the delivery of the majority of the works, which as you highlight, have now started on site. This scheme represents a significant investment in the highway network in Norwich. To be clear, work is not taking place on areas of land which are still subject to acquisition and work will only take place on such areas once the land is vested in the County Council. This process is underway and is expected to be completed in time for when the construction phase of that part of the junction is reached later in the construction period. Construction is currently focussing on areas where land acquisition is not being undertaken and I am pleased to say that work is progressing in accordance with our construction programme.</p>
7.5	<p>Question from Cllr Mike Smith-Clare If the Council is not able to reduce the DSG cumulative deficit through a combination of the transformation programme, capital investment, high needs allocations and the Safety Valve programme from the DfE, then there remains a risk to the overall financial viability of the whole Council. Does the Cabinet Member for Children's Services agree that this risk be added as a separate item on the risk register?</p>

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

The risk register already holds risks relating to the DSG cumulative deficit at both the departmental and corporate risk level. At a departmental level, risk RM14506 "DSG fund overspend" covers the risk that the DSG overspend persists and increases due to rising demand / non delivery of objectives and that liability for this deficit would fall onto the NCC balance sheet. This risk is included on the departmental risk summary for Children's Services in Appendix D of the Risk Management Report on this meeting's agenda. Additionally, we hold two relevant corporate risks that include the Dedicated Schools Grant as well as core NCC funding. These cover the risks of non-realisation of Children's Services Transformation change and expected benefits (RM030) and Children's Services external demand-driven overspend (RM031).

Children's Services is focused on the delivery of Local First Inclusion and making a success of this very significant transformation programme for Norfolk.

The shortfall in DSG funding remains an issue which impacts on a large number of councils nationally and we are continuing to engage with Government about this.

Second question from Cllr Mike Smith-Clare

Misleading information about the responsibility of families to fund independent school places and home to school transport costs was recently withdrawn from phase transfer letters to families of children with EHCPs due to move schools in 2024. Would the Cabinet Member for Children's Services confirm how many of these letters were issued and that those families have now been notified of the council's error and issued with a correct, replacement letter?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

We have recently learned that correspondence to families whose children with EHCPs are transitioning to a new phase of education in 2024 contained an error whereby responsibilities for arranging transport or meeting the fees of children in independent schools was not qualified to reflect the nuances contained within the relevant sections of the SEND Code of Practice 2014. We would like to thank our local Parent Carer Forums for bringing this to our attention and the letters have now been changed accordingly for future years. We are also in the process of writing to all families who have received the correspondence this year to provide clarification regarding the relevant aspects of the Code of Practice and to allay any concerns for a minority of cases to which these arrangements may apply.

7.6

Question from Cllr Terry Jermy

In a reply to my question about the Big Norfolk Holiday Fun scheme at the 4th September 2023 Cabinet Meeting, it was stated that 70 quality assurance visits had been planned to providers across the county over the summer holidays. Please can the Cabinet Member for Children's Services confirm how many visits took place, the full range of issues identified from those visits and if a detailed report will be available on the findings?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

There were 81 quality assurance visits undertaken during the summer programme, plus follow up visits where this was needed. Where any issues are identified these are raised with the provider at the point of the visit or straight afterwards so they can be resolved in a timely manner. A report is written for every visit and feedback and recommendations are shared with the provider. We use the DfE requirements to score each provider across several criteria, including accessibility and inclusiveness, and safeguarding. The information is then used in a number of ways to continuously improve the programme:

- Providers must explain how they will address any recommendations for improvement in their future application or extension of their contract
- A meeting is held with staff undertaking the QA visits to share feedback and identify areas for improvement across the programme which are then shared with providers at sessions after each holiday period and via newsletters
- Additional training or guidance is offered to providers
- The multi-agency HAF Strategy Group receives an update after each holiday programme highlighting any areas for development and the actions being taken

From the Summer programme, the following areas for development have been identified: more embedding of opportunities to learn about food and nutrition as part of activities, training and support to enable younger staff and volunteers to be involved, ensuring appropriate signage at venues, more differentiation of activities when there is a large age range, and working with providers to encourage good levels of attendance.

Supplementary question from Cllr Terry Jermy

Now the summer holiday has ended please can the Cabinet Member for Children's Services confirm how many of the 2,765 places available for children in Thetford as part of this year's Big Norfolk Holiday Fun (HAF) scheme were taken up?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

There were 11 holiday activity providers in Thetford over the summer across 8 locations. 2311 places were booked (83%), and of these 1691 places were actually attended (61% of total places available, 73% of places booked).

The HAF team has worked hard to increase the number of providers in Thetford and to offer a varied programme for children of different ages and interests. There was an increase of 820 spaces over this summer compared to Summer 2022.

Promotion of the programme remains a priority and the HAF team discuss low attendance with providers as part of the QA visits. We use newspaper advertisements, local radio, social media, and direct marketing to families eligible for free school meals as well as via schools. Schools receive free flyers and banners. We also expect providers to promote their offer and they receive a marketing pack of branded items to support them to do this. We monitor attendance and offer extra support to providers with targeted social media where necessary.

7.7	<p>Question from Cllr Maxine Webb</p> <p>Verges that have gone uncut all year in my division, despite my raising with officers, have now become cluttered with strewn and buried litter making cutting difficult and officers tell me that the verges now cannot be cut until the litter has been cleared. Since the Conservatives took back control of Norwich City highways, the previous coordination of litter clearing and verge cutting by the city council can't easily happen.</p> <p>Does the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport agree that this is not helpful for the residents ultimately impacted by having to live in messy, unkempt streets and what will he do about it?</p>
	<p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport</p> <p>I am sorry to hear of the amount of litter within grass verges in the City, but it is worth highlighting that litter picking is the responsibility of the City Council. The local highways team have been working with our contractor to ensure the grass verges within the agreed highway boundary area are cut. Where locations have been missed, and they are within the County Council's areas of responsibility, they have been highlighted to the contractor to remedy. The fourth and final urban grass cutting operation has just commenced on 18 September.</p> <p>As litter picking is a responsibility of the City Council, discussions have already taken place to see how the two teams can better co-ordinate litter picking and grass-cutting activities in future.</p>
7.8	<p>Question from Cllr Ben Price</p> <p>Norwich is the economic centre of Norfolk. The transport infrastructure of the city is integral to the future prosperity of the county. The city's transport must reflect the needs of its citizens. Currently all major transport project decisions are made by one person who doesn't live in or represent the city. We now have a situation where meetings to discuss future transport proposals for the city will take place behind closed doors. The public are now being excluded. Does the cabinet member of highways agree with me that this contravenes the Nolan principles of Openness and Accountability?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport</p> <p>The previous iteration of this body was dysfunctional, being made inquorate by members refusing to take part and depriving the Cabinet Member of advice to assist his timely decision making.</p> <p>The new steering group reflects the well- functioning arrangements of Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn, which have operated successfully for many years.</p>

7.9	<p>Question from Cllr Jamie Osborn The Chancellor said last month that it is right to “be worried if we have an infrastructure project where the costs are getting totally out of control.” He added that the spiralling costs of infrastructure would lead to “having discussions”, to a state where the Government “haven't made any decisions”, and that “we do need to find a way of delivering infrastructure projects that doesn't cost taxpayers billions and billions of pounds.” Substitute “billions and billions” for “millions and millions”, and he could have been talking about the NWL, not HS2. Is the Cabinet Member for Finance “having discussions” with the Leader about the costs of this infrastructure project?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance Thank you for your question. As you will be aware, the Council keeps the cost of all capital projects under careful review on an ongoing basis and reports on these within monthly financial reporting to Cabinet. While we await a Government decision, we have been actively engaging with Government over the funding for the Norwich Western Link (NWL), and continue to believe that a positive announcement will be made soon. As set out in the July report to Cabinet about the NWL, further updates are due to be presented to a future Cabinet.</p> <p>Second question from Cllr Jamie Osborn Following the revelation that thousands of trees planted by the county council along the NDR have died, the Cabinet Member said “Regularly watering such a vast number of plants so close to a high speed dual carriageway was not considered practical, safe or efficient.” If it was not considered practical, safe or efficient to water these trees, why were they planted where they were?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport All planting completed along the NDR was in accordance with the environmental mitigation measures included within the Development Consent Order for the project. As you will be aware we have suffered some significant dry summers over recent years since that planting was completed and this has resulted in some losses, however these are in line with Forestry Commission guidance and expectations for tree planting of this kind. The plants that have been lost have either already been replaced or are due to be replaced in the next planting season.</p>
7.10	<p>Question from Cllr Paul Neale Norwich’s 11,000 highway street trees are dying much faster than the £20,000 a year allocated to replace them with. Even with some one-off government funding our officers have been successful in winning, it still means only 158 trees will be replaced in the next growing season, that’s an average of 12 trees per ward. In my Nelson ward alone we currently have about 70 trees that need replacing plus an estimated loss rate of about 30-40 trees a year. Can the council increase the funding to save Norwich’s trees before our streets are left barren?</p>

Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport

I fully acknowledge that trees offer considerable streetscene and environmental benefits to communities. This Council has successfully applied for 2 rounds of Local Authority Treescaping funding for Norwich street trees, resulting in £178,522 extra budget to be spent on planting street trees in Norwich, which is very welcome news. This is in addition to the general annual highways maintenance budgets. It is also worth highlighting that 100 watering bags have been purchased to help these new trees establish themselves more successfully. To supplement this, you also have the option of using your Local Member Fund (LMF) to plant trees within the highway. If you would like to explore this option further, please discuss this with your local Highway Engineer to agree locations for planting.

