

MEMBER/PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO Scrutiny Committee 19 July 2023

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Please Note: According to the NCC constitution, when a member of the public asks a question at the Scrutiny Committee or a Select Committee they receive an answer through the Chair of the committee. In circumstances where the Chair is unable to provide an answer, they may request that the relevant Cabinet Member or Officer provide a response.

4.1 Question from Glenn Hutchinson

The public have not been informed of the planned closure, the on information coming from the local newspaper, is this a deliberate tactic to reduce the amount of time any potential objectors may have. The decision is obviously anti democratic and will the council open this decision to public consultation?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The site continues to be operational until the end of this year with Adult Learning classes continuing to operate from the site until December 2023. Any marketing of the site for potential sale will take place after this, providing an opportunity for anyone interested in the site to have their say. This includes the opportunity to consider any applications for Community Asset Transfer.

Supplementary Question:

The arguments for closure of the centre are at best debatable, will there be any opportunity to address the arguments?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The decisions made by Cabinet have been called into Scrutiny to enable this debate.

4.2 Question from Richard Cleland

Regarding Wensum Lodge closure. How can the expenditure on architects and other experts on planning the Art Hub scheme be justified if it is now been decided to close the whole venue?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The previous proposal for a creative hub did not progress due to increasing costs and changing habits of adult learners. The initial design estimates undertaken by external consultants had a cost of £20 million, which will have increased significantly due to inflation, particularly of building materials. Also, with a significant shift towards adult learners accessing courses online or in their local community, the proposed usage for the building has become unviable.

Supplementary Question:

Why can't the Art Hub proposal be re-instated and the public money already spent and not wasted?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

As mentioned above, the cost of the creative hub would be in excess of £20 million. External funding has not been secured which means the only way to fund this project would be through public money, and this money is not available.

4.3 Question from Carole Morgan

Wensum Lodge is the jewel in the crown of adult education in Norwich, and has been for decades. Why do you claim that the building is inaccessible, when it is accessible, and that it the building is not adequate, when it is in excellent condition?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

There have been some improvements to the building over the years to make it more accessible. However, there continues to be some parts of the site that are not accessible, for example the pottery studio. The rest of the site is challenging to navigate for some learners, particularly those with mobility issues, as there are many uneven surfaces, slopes, stairs etc. We continue to get feedback from some learners about the difficulties that they have in accessing the site.

No supplementary received

4.4 Question from Nick Patrick

Can Members confirm or deny that NCC has deliberately run down Wensum Lodge and the Jurnet's building with an eye on the real estate value? These are both an important resource for Norwich and the wider county of Norfolk and should be supported.

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The site has not been deliberately run down. There is no benefit to the County Council in doing this as it essentially reduces the value of the site.

It is a complex site that is difficult to maintain whilst also protecting the heritage and history of the buildings. Some buildings suffered significant water damage during the Covid lockdown restrictions when the site was not operational, and issues were not able to be quickly identified.

No supplementary received

4.5 Question from Catherine Simonds

If Wensum Lodge is to close as a learning centre, what will be the effect on the local economy in King Street, which needs a destination draw without the footfall that other city streets benefit from?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The number of learners visiting Wensum Lodge has been reducing over time. We now run just 22% of classes from the site.

Supplementary Question:

The pub closed a long time ago and the new cafes and independent businesses rely on trade from those visiting or working at the excellent courses at Wensum Lodge, making it a destination. How are you intending to protect the learning value destination and economy that the Writing centre and Wensum Lodge bring to this specific area?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The number of people using wensum lodge has been reducing for some time with just 22% of classes now delivered from that site. We will seek alternative locations in Norwich, where needed.

4.6 Question from Maria Pavledis

What provision will be made for popular creative activities currently held at Wensum Lodge which require equipment unsuitable for other venues such as silversmithing, ceramics and printmaking ?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

We know that some courses need specialist equipment and our work to secure suitable locations for future courses is well progressed. We will confirm new locations to learners as soon as possible. In the meantime,

courses will continue to be delivered from Wensum Lodge until the end of this calendar year.

Supplementary Question:

What support will the council be offering to the Norwich Print Hub and those who use it - a popular and much needed resource which supports the livelihood of artists in Norwich

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

It is shame that the Norwich Print Hub will need to relocate. We have given as much notice as possible so that Norwich Print Hub can start to look for alternative locations. The Adult Learning team will also be happy to share information on the venues that they have been considering.

4.7 Question from Frances Martin

I have heard that Wensum Lodge was bequeathed to Norfolk County Council in a will with the proviso that the site was to be used for adult learning. I would like clarification about this, and if so, how can there be a plan to sell the building?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

NP Law have undertaken a detailed assessment as to the title and purchase of Wensum Lodge, which was acquired as part of a wider acquisition of the former Bullard and Sons Limited brewery site on Kings Street. The purchase of the land transfer was made pursuant to the winding up of a company, not via a will or gift.

- 1. The freehold purchase to Norfolk County Council was completed on the 23 February 1961*
- 2. The rights relating to the property, including access over the land in NCC's ownership and the rights granted over other land are all set out in detail.*
- 3. There are no restrictions on the land being used for any purpose. The only stipulations relating to 'use' are some minor restrictions on the sale of alcoholic and soft drinks from the premises*
- 4. We also hold various papers showing the use of the site as a store, offices, the provision of a sports facility and other purposes which would not have been possible had a restriction in the form outlined in the question been in place.*

There is no stipulation that the land (and in particular Wensum Lodge) was to be used for educational purposes.

Supplementary question

As a tutor at Wensum Lodge I do not believe that art courses will be offered venues which will fill the needs of many of the arts courses. Can the committee give any assurance, with the creative hub plan for the site the previous plan, which would have been a good one, and can this be reviewed?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

The previous proposal for a creative hub did not progress due to increasing costs and changing habits of adult learners. The initial design estimates undertaken by external consultants had a cost of £20 million, which will have increased significantly due to inflation, particularly of building materials. Also, with a significant shift towards adult learners accessing courses online or in their local community, the proposed usage for the building has become unviable.

4.8 Question from Caroline Wallace

On what basis/criteria is the site not considered fit for purpose, given that it is in central Norwich and accessible by foot, bicycle, car and public transport, and there is wheelchair access and parking?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

There have been some improvements to the building over the years to make it more accessible. However, there continues to be some parts of the site that are not accessible, for example the pottery studio. The rest of the site is challenging to navigate for some learners, particularly those with mobility issues, as there are many uneven surfaces, slopes, stairs etc. We continue to get feedback from some learners about the difficulties that they have in accessing the site.

No supplementary question received

4.9 Question from Jemma-Jade Watts

Is the council aware that they will be causing the not for profit community arts space Printmaking Hub Norwich to lose its premise with this sale?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

It is shame that the Norwich Print Hub will need to relocate. We have given as much notice as possible so that Norwich Print Hub can start to look for alternative locations. The Adult Learning team will also be happy to share information on the venues that they have been considering.

Supplementary question

Please outline how the Council will be assisting NPH to relocate and assure that this decision wont cause the lose of another cultural organisation from the city?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

It is shame that the Norwich Print Hub will need to relocate. We have given as much notice as possible so that Norwich Print Hub can start to look for alternative locations. The Adult Learning team will also be happy to share information on the venues that they have been considering.

4.10 Question from Michelle Jermy

Wensum Lodge has disabled access, disabled parking, normal parking and is a central location close to Castle Meadow for all bus routes for students. Having attended a taster course where 2 courses were running, 14 students in one course alone and only 7 (full) parking spaces total on site, no disabled facilities or parking at the Hellesdon Adult Ed site opposite Asda, and the need for me to take 4 buses total to attend/get home - it is very clear there are none of these essentials available. Will access, parking, facilities, transport and location for able and disabled people be considered and required going forward?

Response from the Cabinet Member/Officers

We will be looking to secure venues that with greater physical accessibility, more modern space generally, and easier access to parking and other facilities.

No supplementary question received

5. LOCAL MEMBER ISSUES/ MEMBER QUESTIONS

5.1 Cllr Ben Price

Sources have independently raised with me that Wensum Lodge was bestowed to NCC with the caveat that the site must have a provision for the delivery of Adult Learning. If such a caveat is stipulated, this would mean that the cabinet is obliged to reverse its recent decision to revoke the

Adult Learning service from the site and revise its future intention to rationalise the site. Can officers provide both myself and the scrutiny committee conclusive evidence of any and all stipulations within the handover agreement of Wensum Lodge to NCC so we can gain assurance of the validity of the Cabinet's recent decisions in this matter.

Answer by Director of Property

NP Law have undertaken a detailed assessment as to the title and purchase of Wensum Lodge, which was acquired as part of a wider acquisition of the former Bullard and Sons Limited brewery site on Kings Street. The purchase of the land transfer was made pursuant to the winding up of a company, not via a will or gift.

- 5. The freehold purchase to Norfolk County Council was completed on the 23 February 1961*
- 6. The rights relating to the property, including access over the land in NCC's ownership and the rights granted over other land are all set out in detail.*
- 7. There are no restrictions on the land being used for any purpose. The only stipulations relating to 'use' are some minor restrictions on the sale of alcoholic and soft drinks from the premises*
- 8. We also hold various papers showing the use of the site as a store, offices, the provision of a sports facility and other purposes which would not have been possible had a restriction in the form outlined in the question been in place.*

There is no stipulation that the land (and in particular Wensum Lodge) was to be used for educational purposes.