

Cabinet
6 July 2020
Public & Local Member Questions

Agenda item 6 **Public Question Time**

6.1

Question from Judith Lubbock

Covid has delivered unexpected environmental benefits as a result of less traffic, such as lower carbon emissions and more walking and cycling. Norwich therefore could emerge from this crisis as a more inclusive and sustainable city if road space were re-allocated and traffic speed slowed leading to improved facilities for those who have embraced walking and cycling.

Would Cllr Wilby consider 2 suggestions from Eaton residents to that end - that parked cars be removed from Ipswich Road outside City College to allow a safe cycle lane into the city and more 20mph limits on busy city roads such as the entire length of Unthank Road?

Response:

Thank you for putting forward these two suggestions from Eaton residents, which will be fully considered as part of the delivery of the next phase of emergency active travel funding from government (phase 2).

The guidance for this funding is expected later this summer. An 'Active Travel' approach will form the basis of the bid, and there will be opportunities to put additional measures in place to encourage cycling and walking across the county.

6.2

Question from Caroline Ackroyd.

Given the following factors please would you consider adopting a consistent 30 mph speed limit out of Norwich on the A11 to improve safety?

- After Eaton Hill pedestrian crossing, the 50mph speed sign ahead causes an increase in speed meaning that drivers are often travelling over 30mph as they access Eaton slip road.
- Cringleford slip road joins the A11 - drivers invariably must move into the outside lane to accommodate incoming cars.
- 100 yds later a new housing development means that children will need to use the pedestrian crossing to access school on the opposite side of the A11.
- At Roundhouse the speed limit is 40mph until Thickthorn

Response:

When setting speed limits, the Council applies its Speed Management Strategy which is closely related to the current national guidance from the Department for Transport. A key element to both documents is that speed limits must be self-explaining and help to reinforce to drivers the appropriate speed at which to travel. To artificially set a speed limit too low can actually cause more safety problems as the difference in speed between the fastest and average speed of drivers increases. It can also lead to a lack of respect for speed limits in general. Frontage development with facilities such as shops, a school etc. and pedestrian activity are important factors in setting speed limits as they change the highway environment very clearly and reinforce to drivers of the need to reduce speed.

The 30mph speed limit on Newmarket Road conforms to this guidance as it commences around 40m prior to the pedestrian crossing in an area where shared use footways are present at the start of the built-up area. South of this point the A11 is a modern dual carriageway with no frontage development and drivers would not understand the need to travel at less than 30mph. When applying the Speed Management Strategy, being a fringe urban location, a 50mph speed limit is appropriate in the main. A lower 40mph speed limit has been provided on the northbound approach to Norwich due to the added complication of the bus lane and to manage traffic speed down as it reaches the built-up area of Newmarket Road. You also mention the 40mph speed limit between Thickthorn and Roundhouse Way roundabouts. This has been provided to prevent harsh acceleration and braking over the relatively short length of dual carriageway between the 2 roundabouts.

Whilst I understand your concerns, I am unable to support your request for a lower 30mph speed limit on A11. I hope the information above explains the reasons for this.

6.3 **Question from Lucy Hall**

The Secretary of State for Transport is making Emergency Active Travel funding available for local authorities with two objectives: to encourage cycling and walking, and to enable social distancing. However Norfolk's Phase 1 application (included in this meeting's agenda) only addresses the latter, and does not contain any proposals to encourage active travel.

Could the cabinet member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport explain why so few of the measures listed in the Statutory Guidance have been included and state whether measures to support cycling and walking will be included in Phase 2 - if so, is he willing to follow the excellent examples set by some other authorities?

Response:

With the announcement of funding from government, it was important to consider, at very short notice, the lengthy list of suggested interventions that were provided from District, Borough and City Councils, Councillors, stakeholders, community and interest groups, as well as the general public.

Phase 1 concentrated on the rapid deployment of interventions across Norfolk, focusing on the use of the following:

- Advisory one-way pedestrian guidance;
- Temporary widened footways into carriageway using barriers / ground markings / cones;
- Temporary widened footways by suspension of on-street parking;
- Closure of short lengths of road to facilitate pedestrian movements;
- Signage to alert COVID-19 safe distancing measures;
- One way traffic circulation to facilitate wider footways;
- Closing market places to vehicular movement

There was a focus on putting measures in place to support people to socially distance and enable them to safely access non-essential retail, supporting the restarting of the economy. However, I do not agree that encouraging walking and cycling has not been included. Improving the conditions for walking and cycling, for

example by reducing access to vehicular traffic in some areas, was an important consideration and is reflected in the measures put in place

There will be further opportunities to put measures in place to encourage cycling and walking across the county and this will form the basis of the 'Active Travel' approach adopted for the Phase 2 bid process, the details of which have not yet been confirmed by government.

It should also be noted that we have submitted a funding application to Government (Transforming Cities), which outlines a substantial investment in active travel modes across Greater Norwich. This application adopted a "whole-route" approach along corridors into Norwich aimed at prioritising cycle, pedestrian and bus access into the city centre. This is in addition to the £6.1m investment being made on sustainable transport schemes in Norwich as part of our successful funding bid.

Agenda item 7 Local Member Issues/Questions

7.1 Question 1 from Cllr Tim Adams.

Will you give a guarantee that the cabinet will propose no reductions to the Minimum Income Guarantee in either the 2020/21 budget or the Council's medium term financial plan?

Response:

Norfolk County Council took the decision to mitigate our 2020 changes to the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) for four months at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, recognising the impact that the lockdown might have on people and the services they receive. The cost of this decision was covered by some of the Government's Covid19 funding that the Council received.

The Government has indicated that it will look at the issue of funding reform as part of national changes and we are calling on Ministers to bring that forward, as soon as possible.

Provided this is done within a reasonable timescale, we will continue this mitigation for the foreseeable future, subject to the financial demands on the council.

7.2 Question 2 from Cllr Tim Adams

Are you prepared to reverse previous injustice by making a commitment to reversing any elements of previous cuts to the Minimum Income Guarantee?

Response:

The decision taken to implement the MIG reduction is within guidelines set out by Government, which Norfolk County Council had exceeded for as long as we were able to afford it. Until Government publish the Adult Social Care Green Paper we will continue to follow national guidelines, subject to the mitigation measures we have now implemented.

7.3 Question from Cllr Tim East

We hear numerous requests to change the Council's grass cutting policies, which are felt to be too late in the first instance and too early in the second to encourage wildflower growth and biodiversity. Bearing in mind that developing rewilding was one of the early action projects in the environmental policy agreed in November when can we expect some action from you on this?

Response:

The focus of our highway verge cutting regimes continues to be a balance between keeping roads safe and supporting nature. We cut roadside verges only twice per year in rural locations, and up to 5 times per year in urban environments. On our rural roads, cutting is often limited to a 1 metre width from the edge of the road for safety and visibility, thus avoiding grasses and wildflowers that exist further back. We would only cut further at corners and verges where visibility may be an issue.

In many urbanised areas responsibility for cutting verges has been delegated to the district, borough or parish council. This gives local councils the opportunity to cut more often if they choose. Our highways team have already issued cultivation licences to some local councils to plant wildflowers in the verges they maintain. This option is open and available to all district, borough or parish councils. As always, any decision will need to assess the risks and ensure we keep the highway as safe as possible.

With regards to timescales, the first rural cut usually takes place in the middle of May, with the second cut taking place in mid-July. These are a balance of both safety for the travelling public as leaving too late would compromise visibility, and also of cost effectiveness as cutting too early would result in cutting more than twice in a season. Our contractor has been asked to take a pragmatic approach and to cut around wildflowers that do not impose an immediate safety risk.

In addition to the examples above, the Pollinator Action Plan and Roadside Nature Reserve scheme are further examples of how we balance our duty to keep the highway safe whilst minimising the impact on the environment.

7.4 Question 1 from Cllr Dan Roper

What plans does the council have, including the financial and contractual issues, to ensure that school transport is available to all children who qualify when schools return in September?

Response:

We have worked hard with our transport providers to ensure that capacity remains available for home to school transport in Norfolk. The plans for September are dependent on the imminent guidance issued by the Department for Education and the Department of Transport. Until there is clarity of guidance, both in relation to social distancing and arrangements for pupils in different year groups it is not possible to make detailed plans for our transport operation. We expect to have sufficient capacity for the pre COVID-19 scenario and have shared our views regarding the lack of available new capacity in the market with the DfE.

7.5 Question 2 from Cllr Dan Roper

Can the cabinet member give assurances to parents who have previously been able to purchase spare places on school transport that this will still be available in September?

Response:

Parents are able to purchase seats, if available, on school transport where they have made decisions not to send their child to the local school, or where they do not meet the criteria for free transport in the light of distance to school. There is no entitlement to these seats.

At this moment in time it is not possible to provide any reassurance regarding discretionary places. These are only ever available where capacity allows for them and our intention is to maintain this policy in the new academic year.

7.6

Question from Cllr Alexandra Kemp

West Norfolk Economic and Health Infrastructure

Government announced an intention to tackle the “great unresolved challenges of the last three decades” and that no area should be left behind. In West Norfolk, this means three commitments.

- The complete rebuild of our local hospital, now 10 years past its use-by date.
- Immediate delivery of the A10 Bypass in West Winch, that Govt agreed to in 1990, vital for economic recovery and inward investment to the South Lynn Enterprise Zone.
- The new Surgery in South Lynn, agreed in 2006, essential to address health inequalities Post-Covid.

What is the Leader’s strategy for realising all three obligations?

Response:

We are fully committed to see the delivery of the A10 bypass (the West Winch Housing Access Road) as part of the South East King’s Lynn Growth Area. This scheme is essential to enable the 4000 planned new homes and provide an effective bypass around West Winch for traffic that does not need to access the village benefitting residents and road users alike. The need for the new road is supported by Transport East in their 5-year plan for improvements to the Major Road Network with its associated Government funding stream. The County Council is working in partnership with the Borough Council to develop this scheme and its business case to ensure a successful bid can be made to the Major Road Network fund at the earliest opportunity.

We have a clear strategy and set of principles set out in our Business Plan Together for Norfolk and work closely with our local MPs and partner organisations to hold government to account for monies promised to the county.

7.7

Question from Cllr Mike Smith-Clare

I received numerous concerns from local parents and schools regarding the school food vouchers scheme - these included delays in receipt and them not being able to be used in allotted supermarkets. Whilst I know officers have tried their best to get the Department for Education to resolve the problems, can the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services explain what he personally did and who he contacted to try to help hungry children get the food they needed?

Response:

We acknowledge that in the early weeks of the national scheme there were some delays and difficulties experienced by schools and families. As Cabinet Member I asked to be kept abreast of these issues, and ensured that officers and the Executive Director for Children’s Service fed back these concerns to the Department for Education. I personally became involved with a complaint from a family that came to me via an MP. I worked with them, the school and officers to help resolve this.

It is my understanding that our cluster advisers that we put in place at the start of the lockdown, have worked with all schools, and also taken queries from parents.

There have not been any recent issues raised in terms of current difficulties.

In the feedback to the Department for Education we pressed for schools to be funded for schemes that they had already put in place and were working, whilst the national scheme was set up. As a result of this pressure the national guidance was changed to allow schools to be refunded for their own schemes, and to continue with those schemes if they chose not to take up the national scheme. In Norfolk around three quarters of schools took up the national scheme and a quarter continued with their own. At the last count 19,814 children and young people were in receipt of support for meals or vouchers. For some families where children are not on a school roll officers have hand delivered vouchers.

7.8

Question from Cllr Emma Corlett

The Cabinet Member for Children's Services provided a statement to Radio Norfolk that the authority has no mandate to oversee home learning in Norfolk. However s13-14 of the 1996 Education Act place a duty on education authorities to promote high standards of education and fair access to education. The Council also has a duty to make arrangements for the provision of alternative arrangements for children who are unable to attend school. Why is the Cabinet Member denying duties to my and other residents set out in statute?

Response:

The duty to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and monitor the impact of that curriculum lies with schools and their governance. Until June 1st schools were technically closed and not required to provide an education, although most have. They were open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children for childcare. There has been some encouragement and support, that they would be delivering an education. The government has made no attempt to define the way in which this should happen.

On June 1st schools were allowed to re-open for learning for certain specified year groups who could return to school for face to face learning. Still no other expectation, although encouragement and support, was made in terms of wider learning.

Schools have experienced significant staffing challenges which the Local Authority has been monitoring on a daily basis. The focus has been to support schools to be open for the specified children for childcare and more recently for identified year groups for learning. Some schools have had staff who have been shielded, or supporting children who are shielded, and have had staff absent through illness. This has compromised their ability to do extra by providing comprehensive support to every child at home during this crisis. However the vast majority have engaged with children in a range of ways, in order to help them learn at home. Whilst schools have been closed it is the responsibility of parents, if they choose to, to help children learn. Where possible schools have supported this.

National resources were developed, so that parents could help with learning, and very early on we provided lists of supporting resources that schools could send out for parents to use. We know that many parents have worked hard to carry out some learning with their children at home. We know that many have appreciated the support from schools who have prioritised the most vulnerable children, having

made regular calls and delivered hard copy learning activities to those who may not be able to access the online learning.

We are interested to get a broader picture of the creative ways schools have been engaging with those children who have not been in school, whether that is around their wellbeing, or for learning. We will not be monitoring the quality or impact of this, unless our regulatory duties change, but will share best practice. Governing bodies and Academy Trusts retain this duty. Ofsted as the regulatory body that evaluate school effectiveness have also decided not to monitor remote learning at this time or into the autumn term when they recommence their visits.

Under the current COVID arrangements children are still on a school roll and remain the responsibility of schools and their governance.

Schedule 16 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, (1) (a) lifts the duty on local authorities to secure full time education where schools are closed due to Coronavirus.

7.9 Question from Cllr Julie Brociek-Coulton

How will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services monitor the authority's distribution of 1800 laptops for home learning use and ensure they are appropriately used and managed?

Response:

The laptops for children with a social worker have been distributed already via Norfolk schools. The laptops will become the property of the schools and initially are loaned to identified children. Parents or carers will have oversight of their use.

Schools already provide some children with laptops, for example Pupil Premium plus funding has been used to fund laptops for children in care and ultimately they will be added to their resources to be used with children who meet this criteria. We will not be monitoring their use. This will ultimately fall to schools and governing bodies, and social workers will be interested in asking questions about how children are able to use them to access learning.

7.10 Question from Cllr Brenda Jones

What steps will the Cabinet Member for Children's Services take to press government and schools to address the educational attainment gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds that existed in my division and across the county before the emergency and has been made worse by it?

Response:

It is not possible to accurately assess the impact of this time out of the classroom on education attainment. For some children we know that there will be a loss of skill and confidence. Our Learning and Inclusion directorate has provided support materials for schools that will aid the development of a curriculum that focuses on recovery to help children to access learning.

Nationally the government announced last week a £1 billion investment in catch up. This will include £650m of 'catch up premium funding' for pupils who need it and £350m for 'tutoring for disadvantaged pupils'. In every school the curriculum will be

adjusted to support children and young people to catch up.

It will be important to recognise that children achieve well not simply through academic study, and creative approaches to build confidence and strong mental health is equally important. Our support services will have a role to play in supporting schools to develop a wide ranging curriculum which supports good learning to reduce the attainment gap.

7.11 Question from Cllr Mike Sands.

The critical OFSTED/SEND report highlighted a lack of communication with families. What steps has the Cabinet Member for Children's Services taken to communicate personally with those families in my division and elsewhere during lockdown?

Response:

We recognise that the inspectors heard from parents that there is more we must do in relation to communication with parents. This was especially in relation to those children and young people who do not have an Education Health and Care Plan. We understand that they were often unaware of the major transformation programme that is under way, and that in the future it is our intention to enable children to access specialist support and provision more locally, for example through one of our expanded or new Specialist Resource Bases.

I have visited Norfolk schools before COVID-19 to understand the work of special schools and mainstream schools with SEND pupils. These visits have paused during lockdown, but when it is right to do so I plan to re-commence these visits. The officers who lead work in relation to children with SEND, and the Executive Director for Children's Services have been working with the parent / carer forums on looking at how we can improve communication. Just this week all four of the key parent / carer SEND forums met with senior officers to look at the range of ways we can improve this, and I have requested to meet with these groups over the next few weeks. Parents have a mechanism for feeding back their concerns, via these forum and officers are listening and working on how to engage more effectively.

I have further responded to emails received from parents who contacted me as a result of the publication of the report

If Cllr Sands would like to suggest an opportunity for me to listen to parents in his division I would be happy to do so.

7.12 Question from Cllr Dave Rowntree

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds in my division and elsewhere often go to school hungry. As Cabinet Member for Children's Services with responsibility for the wellbeing of the children of Norfolk what steps is he taking to ensure children are not trying to learn on an empty stomach?

Response:

We understand that for some children, starting the day without a good breakfast can affect their ability to learn. Some schools continue to provide breakfast clubs to support those children who may not have been fed before coming to school.

The wellbeing responsibility for children sits with parents and carers. The duties for Children's Services with regard to safeguarding are very explicit. There is a clear system in place, in Norfolk, for referring concerns in relation to children.

It is not the place of schools, or Children's Services to feed all children, nor to monitor whether children arrive at school hungry, and therefore unable to learn effectively. However we know that some schools do provide wrap around care for children, which includes breakfast clubs.

Local community and voluntary sector groups such as Foodbanks and mutual aid groups continue to provide supplies of food and essential items for families in their local communities that need them as well as the Early Childhood and Family Service that is currently supporting with essential baby supplies for children aged 0-5.

Early Help / Community Hubs can also provide local contacts to organisations that offer support and initiatives for our most vulnerable families i.e. Baby Bank Norfolk and have been providing support to families with known extremely vulnerable people at home and those who are shielding to ensure they have access to food, medicines and essential items during the COVID19 pandemic.

The current community hub arrangements regarding delivery of food and essential prescriptions is currently set to continue to the end of July when a further review with all districts will take place. This is linked to the current government funding that was provided for food as part of the COVID-19 response.

The Norfolk Assistance Scheme within Norfolk County Council have supported some families in financial hardship including those awaiting universal credit claims where financial assistance and food parcels have been provided (particularly for those not eligible as were not on the shielded list).

7.13 Question from Cllr Colleen Walker

What plans is the Cabinet Member for Children's Services preparing to ensure that in the event of a future lockdown there are adequate preparations to ensure minimum effect on young learners in my division and across the county whose education has already been disrupted?

Response:

Future lockdowns are likely to be very local. Our cluster structure will stay in place and this provides a constant picture of capacity in all our schools. Schools may have to close for short periods of time, in the event of a local breakout, but this will not be for any length of time so is unlikely to add significantly to the loss in learning. The experience of the past few months will ensure that we are in a better position and there will be less impact on young learners.

7.14 Question from Cllr Chrissie Rumsby

With the expected surge in referrals as children return to school, what steps has the Cabinet Member for Children's Services taken to ensure there is the capacity to deal with children at risk in my division and in all parts of the county?

Response:

- Period of lower referrals to children's social care has meant caseloads for social workers has been reduced to more manageable levels and improvements in performance. In turn, this is building capacity to effectively manage a rise in activity levels.
- Modelling and scenario planning for a potential surge, locally and regionally, is allowing additional capacity to be considered should it be required via the People and Capacity Group. This has identified social work qualified staff in particular from other non-case holding parts of Children's Services, who can be brought in to support as and when required.
- Move some additional resource into our early help response to support emerging need at the most proportionate level and avoid all concerns being escalated unnecessarily into our social work teams.
- Joint recovery and resumption planning across the partnership to ensure all agencies are putting capacity around children and families to meet need/address risk and in alignment with children's social care and other children's services staff.

7.15 Question from Cllr Danny Douglas

What studies has the Cabinet Member for Children's Services commissioned to better understand the long term impact of the lockdown on young learners with particular reference to mental health, educational attainment and life chances of the children in the Mancroft division and elsewhere in Norfolk?

Response:

Since the national lockdown the system around children has responded day by day and week by week to the unfolding crisis. Staff in Children's services, health and in schools and colleges have worked across weekends, and public holidays to support the county's children through lockdown. Whilst concerned as every day passes it has not been the time to deflect staff from their role in leading and co-ordinating this response. I am fully aware of all of the contingency and mitigation activity and planning that has been and is going on across Norfolk's Children's Services which recognises the impact of this period of time on children. We cannot know at a local level, yet, the impact on children's mental health, or on education attainment and the consequent impact on children's futures. Research nationally is emerging, and officers are taking full account of this in their planning. This research requires resource and expertise to begin to evaluate this complex picture. However because we cannot quantify it locally, does not mean we are not focused on supporting education providers and families in addressing it. Children's services staff are working with health colleagues, the voluntary sector and education providers to understand and look at how we can wrap support around children and young people. We will support the £1billion national catch up programme and help schools wherever we need to deliver a curriculum that supports children and young people in achieving well. Working with schools, colleges, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the voluntary and work sector we are already working on ensuring that young people wherever possible do not miss opportunities to transition from school into meaningful education, work or apprenticeships.

7.16 Question from Cllr Chris Jones.

The Children's Services Department only started surveying schools on participation in home learning in my division and elsewhere in Norfolk this week. Given it was the only means for most young learners to get any education for the past three months, why was this not started earlier so results could inform a recovery plan?

Response:

The duty to monitor the curriculum provision made by schools remains with schools and their governance. No new regulatory duties have been given to local authorities.

Schools have been open for childcare until June 1st, and then for childcare and some face to face learning for identified year groups. There has been no prescription from the government about how schools deliver remote learning. There is encouragement for schools to do so, and some resources have been made available nationally and locally.

The survey of schools last week, by the local authority is because we are interested in the range of approaches schools have taken. It is not a monitoring activity. We are asking only so that we can share some of the practice that schools have found most effective more widely.

Until schools see children face to face they will not be able to assess the impact or otherwise of any remote learning that has taken place with children and only then can they make a bespoke plan for each child to provide relevant curriculum support. At this present time there is no meaningful information we could collect for over 120,000 children who have predominantly been engaged in some remote learning over the last few weeks.

Ofsted has the duty to monitor schools effectiveness and this includes how governors and leaders manage their curriculum. They too have decided it is not appropriate to monitor remote learning.

7.17 Question from Cllr Kim Clipsham

What arrangements are in place to get free school meals vouchers to families in my division and elsewhere who have their eligibility confirmed after the end of this term?

Response

There are hardship arrangements in place when schools are not open. The Norfolk Assistance Scheme (NAS) has widened their scope to make small cash grants and/or food parcels available to newly eligible FSM families whilst they are waiting for their schools to be notified and process their voucher applications. This will cover the summer school holiday period. We have notified all schools and asked them to make parents aware. Our customer service centre will be able to direct families appropriately.

7.18 Question from Cllr David Collis.

An article in the Lynn News recently described a possible move for the Kings Lynn Public Library from London Road to a building in New Conduit Street.

A grant was made by the Carnegie Trust for the provision of a library for the people of the town, to be held in a notable building.

What steps would be taken to engage with the Carnegie Trust before any plans are developed, and given the current building's Grade II listed status, what actions would the County Council take to fulfil the requirements of the Trust in maintaining the building if the library was relocated?

Response:

Kings Lynn Library was opened in 1905 by Andrew Carnegie himself. He provided £5000 to build the Library. This was on condition that the Library Act was adopted, and the site donated locally. It is believed he took a special interest in the Lynn Library due to the close proximity of the King at Sandringham who also made a donation towards furnishing the Library. The aim of the library was to support literacy, information and learning in the town to enable its citizens to thrive and prosper in a modern state of the art facility.

The County Council is committed to support the Borough Council through the economic crisis and to do our part to support the future of the Kings Lynn Town Centre. The application as part of the Future High Street Fund is for the relocation of the Kings Lynn library and the creation of a multi user hub in partnership with other public and third sector organisations. If successful, the bid would provide a new, modern, accessible and state of the art facility to benefit the residents of the town and increase footfall in the Town Centre

The County Council will fully engage with the Carnegie Trust and there are no plans at the moment around the future use of the current site. However, there will be a number of consultation and public events as we look forward to the next stage in the development of library and other service provision within Kings Lynn

Norfolk Library and Information Service has a continuing relationship with the Carnegie Trust and most recently was funded to deliver 'You can't judge a book by its cover' a project which explored local people's life stories and mental health.

Kings Lynn Library continues to support literacy and learning in the town and on 6th July will re-open following closure due to the Covid 19 emergency. Library staff have been key in supporting the voluntary response during the crisis in Kings Lynn and West Norfolk.