

Cabinet
29 January 2024
Public & Local Member Questions

	Public Question Time
6.1	<p>Question from Eleanor Laming</p> <p>Pharmacy services have a role in promoting health and addressing inequalities but are operating in an increasingly challenging environment. The growth in online pharmacy services and supply chains can exclude certain groups of residents. What is Norfolk County Council doing to support the ongoing provision of in person pharmacy services, particularly in rural areas?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Prevention</p> <p>Thank you for your question. As Cabinet Member for Public Health and Wellbeing I believe that easy access to pharmacy services is a key part of protecting our population and promoting good health. As you know, Norfolk County Council does not have responsibility for commissioning pharmacy services, this is done by the NHS via the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB).</p> <p>Public Health does however undertake a Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment (PNA) and this is published by the Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB). The PNA is reviewed quarterly and maps the provision of pharmacy services against the needs of Norfolk's population and is available to be used by the commissioners to help inform their decisions.</p> <p>Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment (PNA) updated - Norfolk Insight</p>
6.2	<p>Question from Tom Lyons</p> <p>The uplift should be reviewed up on the basis that it does not adequately support the sustainability of the market. 4.3 highlights that the uplift does not meet all business models, realistically this uplift does not meet any sustainable model without reducing wages of those on the lowest incomes. This is not in a sector that can reduce staffing levels without further risk to quality, which is already at a low - 1.6.2. 5.1 applies an uplift of 7.5% in respect of pay, which is too low considering living wage increases and is flawed to apply the same level of uplifts to LD and OP given higher ratios in LD.</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care</p> <p>Thank you for your question.</p> <p>The work of the social care market and those that deliver care within it are a priority for the Council and we recognise the importance of this sector to both us as a local authority and to residents across Norfolk. We also acknowledge the significant challenges faced by individual providers due to the economic climate and ongoing workforce challenges and we need to balance this within the finances available to the Council to ensure we can provide all our statutory responsibilities. The recommendations for Cabinet today include increasing the budget by £23.2m to manage increases in fees, building on the £48m budget increase over the previous two years.</p> <p>As set out in the Cabinet paper and detailed within the Market Sustainability Plan, we will continue to push for higher wages for care workers in order to be competitive with other labour markets.</p>

	<p>Our assessment of the fee rates for Older adult care homes and domiciliary care provision (18+), is that the pay rate included within our current (23/24) usual fee and framework rates were set at levels above the National Living Wage (NLW). The % increase relating to the pay uplift (7.5%) would enable providers to still pay a rate that is above NLW.</p> <p>Regarding Learning Disability residential provision, we are currently undertaking a project focusing on re-developing the residential care market for working age adults and a request for data to support this review is due to be sent to Learning Disability (LD) Providers in February 2024. This review will include cost of care activity, and support the design of a strategy for the future of LD residential services for working age adults in Norfolk. We would encourage Providers to take part and help inform this key area of work. It is also important to note that we have prioritised use of the funding via the Market Sustainability Improvement Fund, on Working Age Adults</p> <p>Lastly, providers can contact the Council at any time to discuss any financial concerns.</p>
6.3	<p>Question from Nick Taylor</p> <p>Is any Cabinet member aware that, if they decide to cut Norfolk's Minimum Income Guarantee to the legally allowable minimum, it will mean that the most vulnerable people in Norfolk, some of whom are already in despair and debt, will have 10% of their income taken away by the council in care charges?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care</p> <p>Thank you for your question. This is certainly not a decision that the Council will take lightly, but we do need to consider this as part of managing our finances to ensure that we are in position to meet our statutory duties for all residents of Norfolk not just this year, but into the future. We know that there will be continued financial constraints, and the Council needs to manage the financial challenges from growing demand, greater complexity of need and higher costs brought about by both inflation and the increase in the National Living Wage. We are proposing to start a consultation on the Adult Social Care Charging Policy including the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee for non-residential care next month. We want to encourage as many people as possible to engage with and contribute to this consultation. We will of course be contacting people that will be directly affected, but we also welcome the support of wider groups and organisations to help share this message.</p>

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	Member Question Time
7.1	<p>Question from Cllr Terry Jermy I note with concern that the number of County Farm tenants has reduced over the past ten years from 130 in 2014 to just 95 in 2023. With the recent changes discussed at the NCC Corporate Select committee which sought views on amending the policy to make tenancies even larger, can the Cabinet Member confirm how many tenancies there are likely to be available in the future?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Innovation The amount of County Farms land (let to tenants) has remained stable over the last ten years at over 16,000 acres. However as was also discussed at the Corporate Select Committee Cllr Jermy refers to, larger tenancies are required for an arable farm to operate economically, given fixed costs such as machinery like tractors and combine harvesters.</p> <p>Over the last ten years, County Farms has adapted the size of tenancies to ensure they provide tenants with economically viable tenancies along with a clear route of progression farms to help people into agriculture and to grow their businesses in a managed way. We will continue to work with our tenants to ensure holdings are viable and will be responsive to their needs, as well as the external environment throughout the life of the County Farms strategy.</p> <p>We will continue to make sure that holdings are viable agricultural businesses in the heart of our rural community – providing high quality, Norfolk food.</p>
7.2	<p>Question from Cllr Paul Neale There are calls for a criminal investigation of the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust into the 8440 “unexpected” deaths between April 2019 - October 2022 all of whom were either under their care, or had been up to six months before they died. With 45 deaths a week in 2022-23.</p> <p>As this could be the largest deaths crisis in the history of the NHS could Cllr Bill Borrett, who is also chair of the Integrated Care Partnership, share with us what is being done about such horrifying statistics and to end the revolving door of CEO’s to the trust, who invariably claim they will turn the situation around.</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Prevention Thank you for your question. As you are aware Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust (NSFT) is not run by Norfolk County Council or the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Partnership (ICP). The Norfolk Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), which has County Councillors on it, is looking at this and had it on its Agenda back in September 2023. I hope that you do not mind but I have passed the Chairman of HOSC a copy of your question.</p>
	Second question from Cllr Paul Neale

The Minimum Income Guarantee is just £187.13 per week, a meagre amount for those with various complex needs. The recipients of this allowance, and their carers, are really worried that the amount could be reduced in the ever increasing budget cuts review.

To take away the anxiety for those who have a hard enough life already, can the Cabinet member for Finance reassure recipients that no cuts will be made in this year's budget.

Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

Thank you for your question. I would refer you to my answers to the questions raised by Nick Taylor and Cllr Blundell in particular.

Unfortunately, as the budget paper sets out, the financial position facing the Council now and for the medium term and specifically facing Adult Social Services means that we need to look at all aspects of our spending and our income. As a Council we need to ensure that we can deliver our statutory responsibilities to all residents of Norfolk, including continuing to support the 25,000 people that we reach and continue to commission care for them or provide direct payments and for this reason we have proposed that we carry out full consultation about our charging policy.

7.3

Question from Cllr Ben Price

Across Norfolk there were 11,058 cases of waste being dumped illegally, compared to 10,761 in 2021-22. Norwich was 28th worst in the country for fly-tipping by population out of 309 local authority areas, with 36.7 recorded incidents per 1,000 people. What assessment has been made to understand how closing all of Norfolk's recycling centres on Wednesdays to save £200,000 a year and introducing booking slots to get rid of waste to save a further annual sum of £200,000 will increase fly-tipping rates in Norwich, and is it really fair to put the costs of this saving onto the district council?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

Fly-tipping is criminal behaviour committed by a small minority of people who flout the law and blight Norfolk's countryside. The majority of fly-tipping is committed by rogue traders offering cheap waste clearance and over 80% of fly-tipped materials in Norfolk could have been taken to one of the County Council's Recycling Centres for free.

Any increase in fly tipping is concerning, although it is noted that the question offers a narrow comparison between one year and another. A more robust assessment of Norfolk's fly-tipping data looking back over the last decade shows no evidence of upward or downward trends in Norfolk. Whether the County Council has been providing newer, bigger and better Recycling Centres or increasing the scope of charges for DIY waste, as it did in 2018, there has been no evidence of associated changes in fly-tipping behaviour.

The real responsibility for fly-tipping belongs to the fly-tippers and elsewhere around the country where booking systems are commonplace, government studies have shown no link to incidents of fly tipping.

Second question from Cllr Ben Price

To produce a balanced budget for the 24/25 cycle, the council needs to draw down nearly half of all reserves set aside for adults and children's services. With no firm commitment from the Government or the opposition to increase funding for these areas, we should

expect the same scenario for 25/26, depleting all reserves. Can this council remain a going concern for the 26/27 cycle, while also meeting our statutory obligations?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance

Thank you for your question. I have been clear that we face difficult decisions in setting the 2024-25 Budget. As a Council, we are also acutely aware of the risks of over reliance on reserves to produce a balanced budget and this is something which we scrutinise closely each year to ensure that our financial plans are robust and sustainable. The judgement on the adequacy of reserves is provided in the 2024-25 Revenue Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-28 report as part of the Statement on the Adequacy of Provisions and Reserves 2024-28 (Appendix 3 on pages 405 to 432). This sets out in detail the level of reserves and provisions held by the Council both centrally and within individual departments. Table 4 (page 419) lists the department level balances and demonstrates that, whilst we are anticipating a year on year reduction, these are not forecast to be depleted by 2026-27. As part of this statutory report, the Section 151 Officer advises that *“The proposed level of reserves and balances set out in this report is considered to provide a prudent and robust basis for the Revenue Budget 2024-25 and will ensure the Council has adequate financial reserves to manage the delivery of services and the proposed savings in the financial years covered by the associated Medium Term Financial Strategy.”*

Further, as part of the preparation of the Budget, the Director of Strategic Finance is required under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 to report on the robustness of the overall Budget, which includes taking a view of the medium-term position. This is described in Appendix 4 from page 433 of the Cabinet report. It should be noted that there remains a significant degree of uncertainty about the level of funding for Local Government from 2025-26 onwards. Indeed, on 24 January, we have seen that Government has listened to the concerns raised by the sector and confirmed a welcome and significant uplift in social care funding for 2024-25, which will be set out as part of the final Settlement in early February. This serves to highlight the potential for change in future year funding, which is certain to have a bearing on the County Council's overall financial position. The County Council continues to engage with Government, MPs and other stakeholders to campaign for adequate and sustainable funding for Norfolk to maintain delivery of vital services to residents, businesses and visitors. In this context, the Budget setting process each year seeks to take into account the wider environment in which the Council is operating in order to inform plans about reserve usage and the level of savings required. The Council has a strong track record of setting a robust and balanced Budget, and we will, as always, be monitoring closely during 2024-25 to ensure that this is achieved. On this basis I believe it is premature to speculate that we might exhaust our reserves in 2025-26 or indeed a future year, and I would therefore reject the suggestion that the Council is not a going concern.

7.4 Question from Cllr Catherine Rowett

According to the Council's 2022 glyphosate policy there are six options for how else to control or manage weeds on the highways and footways in preference to implementing glyphosate-based chemical treatments. Can the cabinet give an update for how many of these options are currently in use for county roads as routine ways of dealing with weeds, and how they are monitoring the effectiveness of their integrated weed management approach as a way of stopping the use of glyphosate, and how the results so far sit with the council's nature recovery and pollinator plans?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

The Council is committed to minimising the use of glyphosate to control the growth of weeds as detailed in the council's Glyphosate Policy. The policy also takes full account of the objectives and strategies set out in both the Council's Pollinator Strategy and Environment Policy.

In terms of highways, the use of glyphosate has been reduced by approximately 50%, as weed spraying has already reduced from 2 treatments to 1 treatment across the network.

The Council will review new methods of weed management as they become available to establish the viability of alternative weed control, although as the highway service require a fully mobile operation, other alternative methods such as thermal treatment or acidic chemical treatment have found to not be viable options.

It is also worth highlighting that the growth of weeds on highways verges is mainly controlled through the grass cutting programme across the network.

Supplementary question from Cllr Catherine Rowett

Bee-killing pesticides (neonicotinoids) have controversially been approved by the Conservative Government for use on sugar beet this year. The county council's Pollinator Action Plan, adopted this month, commits the council to work with others to do more to support pollinators. Does the Cabinet Member agree that the decision to allow neonicotinoids on sugar beet in Norfolk directly undermines the council's efforts under the Pollinator Action Plan?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste

Neonicotinoid insecticides are used in some pesticides to kill crop-harming insects. The use of most neonicotinoids was severely restricted in 2013 in the EU and UK due to their potential negative impact on bees and other pollinators. By 2020, all but one neonicotinoid was no longer approved for use. However, emergency authorisations are allowed to control pests on sugar beet. Whilst this pesticide is harmful to bees its use is restricted and only licenced by government.

7.5 Question from Cllr Jamie Osborn

Residents on Bull Close in Mancroft have been experiencing speeding and antisocial parking. One solution to this would be installation of chicanes to slow traffic, which could also provide valuable space for planting trees, as has been done on Alexandra Road in the Nelson division. Chicanes are a long-term solution that can improve quality of life for residents, but seem not to be being considered by the county council. Can the Cabinet Member tell me when the last time a chicane was installed in a residential street in Norwich?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport

Please discuss this in the first instance with your local Highway Engineer as this should be undertaken as part of the duties of a local Member.

Supplementary question from Cllr Jamie Osborn

From my experience as a ward councillor, there have been delays to obtaining feasibility studies for transport improvement projects. I was concerned to read Cllr Plant's response

to Cllr Price's question on 10 January stating that he does not know how many feasibility studies remain incomplete, with no overview of the delays. Will the Cabinet Member rationalise this process to ensure there is proper monitoring in place?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport

As outlined in my response on 10 January, officers and councillors engage on a regular basis, both formally and informally, on a wide range of transport improvement proposals, some of which lead to further investigation and the production of feasibility studies. I believe this process to be effective without the requirement to increase workloads through the introduction of additional processes. The current processes enable hundreds of highway improvement measures to be installed across Norfolk every year.

7.6

Question from Cllr Brian Watkins

Failures in HR systems have been at the forefront of the news cycle over the past fortnight due to the Horizon Scandal. Recently, this council has faced its own struggles with its HR system, MyOracle. Will the Cabinet Member commit to publishing a full report on the system's failings for means of openness and disclosure to staff members of this council?

Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategy and Governance

There was recent local media coverage that made reference to errors in pay for 78 members of staff and the story falsely equated this with the MyOracle system.

The MyOracle system supports the delivery of finance, procurement, HR and payroll activities. Implementation of any software system on this scale creates transformational change which require changes to the way we work to achieve all the benefits a modern IT system brings with it. Our Corporate Select Committee was kept updated during implementation.

Norfolk County Council is a complex organisation with a wide variety of roles and activities that require pay to be calculated in numerous ways. We have over 8000 employees and we also utilise myOracle to provide HR and payroll services to a number of other organisations. In total we pay over 18,000 workers and a total of £42 million each month. We recognise that as we embed the system and the necessary changes to how we work this can result in errors that in some instances have impacted on peoples pay. It is regrettable when anyone's pay is not correct, and we are sorry for the concern this caused any individual affected. We always look to correct any underpayments as a matter of urgency.

Norfolk County Council take all reasonable steps to ensure everyone's pay is correct first time, but it is not unusual for errors to occur in pay calculations for large organisations. Not least because they can arise because of multiple factors including human ones as was the case covered in the local media. Norfolk County Council had to manage such occurrences under our previous system too and the current error rate is lower than with that system. The implementation of myOracle has already brought us many benefits including manager and employee self-service in a number of areas that were not previously possible.

We continue to work hard on improving the ease of use of the system for our managers and employees to help reduce errors further and provide additional benefits to colleagues and the organisation.

7.7	<p>Question from Cllr Sharon Blundell</p> <p>One of this council's identified priorities when handling social care is to provide adequate support for people 'to live independently, avoid losing independence, and where possible gain it back.' With this in mind, what message does the Cabinet Member have for those who rely on the Adult Social Care service who will be affected by a reduction in the MIG and thus have their independence threatened?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care</p> <p>The Council's financial position – and the position of Adult Social Services – is set out clearly in the Cabinet papers today. On any one day in Norfolk, we are supporting in excess of 20,000 people and in order to continue to do the best we possibly can within the resources we have, we need to look at all aspects of our budget. This includes the contributions people make towards the cost of their care – and in doing this all councils consider government advice on the minimum income guarantee. We currently follow the legal minimum level for older people and we are above the legal minimum for people of working age. Through our engagement with some representatives, we do understand the impact of changes for people with disabilities. I have been in contact with the Charging Reference Group and hope to meet with them in the future.</p>
7.8	<p>Question from Cllr Tim Adams</p> <p>Further budget proposals are due to go out to public consultation, including the controversial decision to reduce the Minimum Income Guarantee. What response from this consultation would it take for this administration to rethink its decision to reduce MIG and to ensure this consultation is not merely a formality?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care</p> <p>Thank you for your question. Hearing from people as part of the consultation will be very important and the consultation options and approach are still under discussion, and we are engaging with others to help shape this to make sure that we can hear from as many people as possible. People's views will help shape the information that is provided to Cabinet, including the equality impact assessment. I would also refer you to my answers to the questions raised by Nick Taylor and Cllr Blundell.</p>
7.9	<p>Question from Cllr Alexandra Kemp</p> <p>Council plans budget savings of £525,000 with "S2425CS005 Inclusion: More primary aged children with SEND travel independently with Travel Independence Travel Across Nation (TITAN) programme" and S2425CS006 Inclusion: Ongoing focus on Home to School Transport maximising travel independence".</p> <p>Council's plans to switch off 2% of streetlights are inconsistent with these aims. It is a safety risk to children of all abilities to wait at bus stops in the dark or walk to school in the dark in winter, a disincentive to reduce the £7.5 million the Council currently spends on Home-to-School Transport.</p> <p>Streetlights are where they are, for safety.</p> <p>Can Cabinet confirm NCC has abandoned plans to switch off streetlights?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport</p>

	<p>The council has some difficult challenges in balancing the budget for the coming financial year and the proposal for switching off a small proportion of the streetlighting asset is one way in which the council can both make a financial saving, a carbon saving, and reduce the amount of light pollution in the environment. In selecting the 2% of the asset, a number of factors will be taken into account including highway safety considerations, which includes pedestrian safety. A number of lights are also likely to be in locations where we would now no longer install street lighting on the network, as over time design standards and expectations change.</p> <p>Therefore, the budget proposal remains and subject to Cabinet approval, will be consulted on so a final decision can be made.</p>
7.10	<p>Question from Cllr Colleen Walker</p> <p>I asked the Leader at December's Council for the letter she wrote to the Secretary of State about coastal erosion after September's unanimous Council decision. She replied 'I don't have the letter in front of me but we'll see if we can actually find it....'. In fact she hadn't sent one and still hasn't. The December Council decision hasn't been actioned either. In a message to me subsequently she said the first letter wasn't sent because the Secretary of State had changed before it could be. Council was 26th September. Thérèse Coffey was responsible minister until 13th November. Why did the Leader mislead me, council and the people of Hemsby?</p> <p>Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategy and Governance</p> <p>I do not agree that I have misled anyone. When responding I was unsure of the status of the letter and was open about this to members and pledged to find out.</p> <p>I made personal contact with you to update you on this situation.</p> <p>This issue will be raised directly with Norfolk MPs as well as the Minister and Secretary of State on 31st January and I had preliminary discussions with Steve Barclay when he visited Norfolk on 22nd January.</p> <p>This administration continues to proactively engage on this issue.</p>
7.11	<p>Question from Cllr Julie Brociek-Coulton</p> <p>I've been told on three separate occasions that there is no demand for a carer parking permit scheme and that it will cost too much money. What surveys have been carried out to establish there is no demand, how will these findings be shared with councillors and how much has the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport calculated that such a scheme would cost?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport</p> <p>It is important to note that there are usually alternative arrangements to enable car parking near to client addresses. The majority of carers park legally in restricted areas using systems already in place to do this, including using visitors permits in residential parking areas.</p> <p>The existing parking agreements across the county already allow health / care workers to purchase daily permits to park in existing resident parking zones at a considerable discount. As such there are no current plans to develop a new scheme or costs available.</p>

7.12	<p>Question from Cllr Brenda Jones</p> <p>It is clear that any reduction in the value of the Minimum Income Guarantee will have a significantly detrimental impact on Norfolk's residents with disabilities and their families. Will the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care therefore scrap this proposal immediately and remove this recommendation from the budget papers?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care</p> <p>Thank you for your question. I would refer you to my answers to the questions raised by Nick Taylor and Cllr Blundell in particular.</p> <p>As the budget paper sets out, the financial position facing the Council now and for the medium term and specifically facing Adult Social Services means that we need to look at all aspects of our spending and our income. As a Council we need to ensure that we can deliver our statutory responsibilities to all residents of Norfolk, including continuing to the support the 25,000 people that we reach and continue to commission care for them or provide direct payments.</p>