

Cabinet
5 September 2022
Local Member Questions

	Local Member Issues/Questions
7.1	<p>Question from Cllr Alexandra Kemp Is NCC is about to repeat its historic mistake of signing a major contract that leaves Council open to financial risk? Cabinet's delegated decision of 22 August approved the purchase of the old Argos shop for a replacement Library in King's Lynn before due diligence is complete. The report says "vendor is in administration and being managed by receivers who do not know the property well. They have been unable to answer many of the standard legal enquiries and this creates additional risk for NCC". NCC could purchase property, in an area of abnormal ground conditions, that is not fit for purpose.</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Commercial Services and Asset Management Cllr Kemp's question is misleading as it has not provided the full quote, as the report goes on to say</p> <p>"However, given the nature of the property and NCC's proposed redevelopment and use, this is not considered to create a material risk."</p> <p>NCC are seeking to retain the building's sub and super structure, demolishing the exterior façade and therefore will not be undertaking ground works.</p> <p>CPSEs are a standard legal document, best used for new occupiers of an existing occupied building and therefore a risk-based approach is taken, when there are fundamental refurbishment works to be undertaken.</p> <p>The new library will provide a fantastic facility for Kings Lynn residents, delivering a number of social and environmental benefits; as well as providing a modern library and adult learning facility within the heart of the town.</p> <p>Second Question from Cllr Alexandra Kemp Council's Strategic Priorities include HEALTHY, FULFILLING AND INDEPENDENT LIVES and • STRONG, ENGAGED AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES. My visits to the Clenchwarton, West Lynn, South Lynn and West Winch stops, show the Mobile Library Service is a community lifeline, especially for families, and older and disabled residents who cannot drive or use tablets – there are Large Print Books, Talking Books for the Visually Impaired, Assistive Technology, Warm and Well Packs, Blue Badges forms, leaflets about Health Checks. The Librarian looks out for vulnerable residents and can be the only person they see all week. Can Cabinet withdraw its planned £200,000 cut to the £422,000 service budget and expand the service's remit?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Partnerships A public consultation on the mobile library service is underway. We will be carefully reviewing the feedback from the consultation to help us to develop a proposed way forward for the service. It would be premature of me to comment any further as the public consultation has not closed yet.</p> <p>If you have not done so already, I would encourage you to submit your views as part of the consultation so that they can be taken into account.</p>

7.2

Question from Cllr Paul Neale

The internal auditors 2021/22 report highlighted several suspected frauds and three cases of unauthorized access to databases by council staff. These data breaches resulted in one resignation after investigation, another resignation before undergoing investigation and a third resulting in sanctions. Random sampling is usually done in auditing, then when concerns come to light, they drill down further on those particular issues which means that only a percentage of possible wrongs come to light. Could the cabinet member confirm that only random sampling has taken place and if so, what is planned to widen the scope of auditors to reassure us that there are not others in the closet missed.

Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance

We cannot comment on individual cases. Where relevant some Council employees are allowed access to third party databases under strict rules to protect the information from misuse or inappropriate access. Full training is provided on the rules, what is expected of those that use the system and what the consequences of any breaches can be. Those systems often have security features that flag when inappropriate access has been attempted or taken place. Two types of check are performed by the third party, one automatic the other random, which we consider is sufficient. The automatic check covers the employee, their family or close links. The other check is a frequent direct (real-time) random request to a system user to ask for details and justification for accessing that record. The access justification is then passed to a manager to review and then compared to a report from the third party. The Council is notified of any incidents and we investigate them fully, as per our internal disciplinary procedures. Once the investigation is complete a decision is made whether further steps are appropriate and the outcome is reported back to the third party. The third party may apply a sanction themselves such as suspending access temporarily or permanently for a particular user. It is worth noting that the reported cases did not relate to fraud concerns.

Second Question from Cllr Paul Neale

Commenting on the sale of Norwich Airport Industrial Estate, Cllr Peck stated that the sale would help “deliver a sustainable future for existing and new businesses.” Considering that we are in a climate emergency, with wildfires at the fringe of the airport estate just a few weeks ago, can Cllr Peck confirm whether the capital receipts from the sale will be ring fenced for investment to decarbonise Norfolk, and not for the carbon-intensive Western Link?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Commercial Services for Asset Management

As Cllr Neale will be aware, Norfolk County Council does not normally ring-fence receipts, rather they fund our overall capital programme.

This funds a number of priorities as set out in the Council's Capital Strategy and fund investment into a number of areas.

Cllr Jamieson, as the Cabinet Member for Finance has set out the priorities for Capital spend in some detail to both Cabinet, Scrutiny, and Full Council – addressing specifically the work NCC is doing around the environment.

7.3

Question from Cllr Brenda Jones

How many care homes closures in Norfolk is the council planning for over the winter period and what emergency arrangements are in place to ensure any displaced residents are kept safe?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Services, Public Health and Prevention

Thank you for your question.

As you are aware Care Homes are independently owned and run businesses, they are not run by Norfolk County Council. However, the Council does monitor risks across the sector and works collaboratively with providers where viability concerns are raised. The monitoring of risk within the Residential and Nursing Care market is supported by a Provider Risk dashboard, which takes into account key information to help understand the challenges providers are facing. This information is then reviewed by a multi-disciplinary group of officers, from across Commissioning, Procurement, Market Development and the Integrated Quality Service.

The current challenges around occupancy, workforce and costs are increasing the business risks for care providers. We are aiming to support the private providers by to commission care home energy assessors to help identify any opportunities to reduce energy usage. To help mitigate financial risks, the Council undertakes an annual review of price uplifts each year and for older people residential and nursing conducted a cost of care exercise, which helped set the fee rates in April this year. Quality of provision is another key factor and the Integrated Quality Service works with providers to help support and sustain care quality improvement. Where planned closures are notified to the council we try and work closely with providers, individuals and their families to identify alternative care and support people with moves. Normally, there is a reasonable notice period ahead of any closure and people will be able to make a considered choice. Occasionally there are emergency arrangements required where care cannot be delivered safely, and additional staff or temporary management support may be put in place to manage the transition to alternative care provision.

Second Question from Cllr Brenda Jones

Non residential care services are experiencing a sharp rise in fuel costs on top of staffing vacancy pressures and rising levels of need. What steps are the council providing to protect people from care breakdown, support care services, oversee the risks of rising costs, and provide political oversight so that all members can be kept informed?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Services, Public Health and Prevention

Thank you for your question.

As you will know because it has been discussed in Full Council, the Council responded to the immediate fuel cost rises experienced in early spring with any further increase in the home care hourly rates, on top of the planned annual uplift. As with all councils, we have been undertaking a fair cost of care exercise with the domiciliary care market, which will be reported to members within the Council's market sustainability plan and as part of the preparations towards social care reform.

	<p>NCC is working closely with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to explore options to help increase care capacity. Over the last year Norfolk First Response reablement service has helped provide continuity of care, where care has ceased and alternative provision has not been readily available. Clearly this has reduced capacity for reablement and additional actions are being put in place this winter to strengthen this service. Brokerage sourcing and commissioning teams are regularly in contact with providers discussing capacity and risks, these are reported to internal capacity updates and director oversight meetings. You will also know that we already regularly report provider risks to Members as part of the Performance Review Panel and People and Communities Select Committee.</p>
7.4	<p>Question from Cllr Chrissie Rumsby Who has been contracted to supply grab and go bags available from libraries and what are their profit margins on the packs?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Partnerships There is no contract. Libraries staff have worked hard to source supplies direct from wholesalers and put bags together on site to ensure we can get the best value possible.</p>
7.5	<p>Question from Cllr Julie Brociek-Coulton A response to a cabinet question about the state of verges, flower beds and roundabouts in the city referred only to verges and money to the city council for work in the inner areas of the city. Will he now explain why roundabouts, flower beds, and verges outside the central areas of Norwich are being so badly neglected?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Highways, Infrastructure and Transport Countywide, highway verges are the responsibility of the County Council.</p> <p>Planting schemes within verges such as flower beds usually are the responsibility of the local Borough, District or City Council.</p> <p>Grass cutting on all urban highway verges and roundabouts is the responsibility of the County Council and if there are specific issues to highlight at certain locations, please can you make your local highways team aware. In these areas, there is always a balance to achieve between highway safety and environmental benefits</p>
7.6	<p>Question from Cllr Emma Corlett Small businesses, arts and charitable organisations are facing uncapped fuel price increases that may drive them under. What support should the government provide to help them and what can the council do to help?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Growing the Economy Businesses have lobbied hard for support with their energy bills, and both candidates for prime minister are considering the measures they will announce, if successful. The support the Council can provide is, in conjunction with partners such as the LEP, to signpost organisations to any support that the government introduces, through our websites and Growth Hub business advisers.</p>

7.7	<p>Question from Cllr Terry Jermy In the last two years heating oil has trebled in price. Many Norfolk residents particularly in rural areas rely on oil for heating. What steps is the council taking to ensure they are not overlooked when support is considered for those experiencing huge increases in gas and electricity prices?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Growing the Economy The County Council has developed a comprehensive hardship offer, making full use of the Household Support Grant provided by central government, as well as allocating additional funding locally. The Norfolk Assistance Scheme is able to provide help with energy costs and we have worked proactively with partners in the public and voluntary sector to identify need and target support</p> <p>I appreciate that many residents, particularly in rural areas, rely on heating oil as their main heating source, and I am aware that there have been significant increases in heating oil prices, as there has been with electricity and gas prices. We remain committed to supporting those who face financial hardship through our Norfolk Assistance Scheme and we continue to work with colleagues in the voluntary and community sector to enable people to access the various support and guidance available.</p>
7.8	<p>Question from Cllr Steffan Aquarone Please answer this question from last month with the information that you were asked to provide - Can you tell us of your analysis of by how much social isolation will be increased by a substantial reduction in mobile library routes and how much in additional costs this is likely to cost Adult Social Care?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Partnerships A public consultation on the mobile library service is underway. We will be carefully reviewing the feedback from the consultation to help us to develop a proposed way forward for the service. It would be premature of me to comment any further as the public consultation is not yet finished.</p> <p>To repeat what I said to you last month, Norfolk Library Service is committed to reducing social isolation in the county and has been a national leader in developing offers like “just a cuppa” within branch libraries.</p>
7.9	<p>Question from Cllr Rob Colwell Please answer this question from last month with the information that you were asked to provide - If the energy costs reach the anticipated levels that are predicted in the national press with the average bill cost potentially hitting £5,300 in April how many people are you anticipating will be pushed into poverty and severe poverty in Norfolk as a result of these increases?</p> <p>Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Governance and Strategy Thank you for your question. I would reiterate my response from the last cabinet meeting that NCC are working hard to support residents who face the possibility of</p>

	<p>not being able to pay their food and energy bills, especially with winter on the horizon. I would also emphasise that NCC is working on developing further measures to help support those who need assistance with cost of living to avoid people falling into poverty and severe poverty and will do all we can in conjunction with help given so far from government and hopefully more to come in the future.</p> <p>NCC has and continues to develop a comprehensive hardship offer, making full use of the Household Support Grant provided by central government, as well as allocating additional funding locally. The Norfolk Assistance Scheme is able to provide help with energy costs and we have worked proactively with partners public and voluntary sector to identify need and target support</p>
7.10	<p>Question from Cllr Lucy Shires</p> <p>We are hearing howls of complaints from officers about how poor myOracle is functioning with staff not being paid the right amount or even not being paid at all. Please confirm exactly how much it has cost the council to implement the myOracle system so far and what further payments there will be to right all the problems?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Innovation, Transformation and Performance</p> <p>The MyOracle programme is a major transformation that not only looks to replace our HR/Payroll, Finance, Budgeting and Procurement software but will also introduce significant new ways of working including Employee, Manager and Customer self service. Over the period of the long term contract efficiencies and savings will be achieved with these new ways of working. There have been challenges with some elements of the implementation and the teams responsible for these services have worked incredibly hard together to resolve matters as quickly as they could. Progress has continued to be made in improving these services and reducing issues on a month by month basis and steps continue to be made to improve the use of the technology across the organisation. We are clearly sorry for the impact that this has had to those who have suffered difficulties during this time and want to make it clear we are committed to continually improve how we operate the system.</p> <p>This programme has been a large investment for the organisation which will deliver significant improvements to service over the coming years. The overall programme had a budget of £19.5m which includes ongoing support and development through to the financial year 2024/25. At this point in time £17m has been spent on the system and its implementation.</p> <p>Second Question from Cllr Lucy Shires</p> <p>I would welcome your support for using the Libraries as warm hubs during this winter and would encourage you to make sure that this is a key part of the council's new cost of living scheme?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Partnerships</p> <p>I agree that Libraries can offer a warm place for people to meet, learn, read, get support and many other things; the service will continue to be 'Warm and Welcome'. We have already extended the opening hours for libraries by putting in place Open Library technology that enables library users to access the building for longer periods of time, including evenings, weekends and when not staffed.</p>

	<p>We of course welcome any residents into libraries during the colder winter period. As well as offering warm spaces, we are extending our provision of hot drinks and provide bags of essential items 'To Go'. There are also many opportunities to use the library facilities, learn and get involved in community activities whilst there. I would encourage residents to sign up for Open Library access (anyone over the age of 16 can sign up and families can come in together).</p>
7.11	<p>Question from Cllr Tim Adams Can the portfolio holder for finance inform me of the Conservative's plan to lower the level of debt that Norfolk County Council has to an acceptable amount?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance I do not accept the premise of the question that the County Council's level of debt is unsustainable. The level of debt will continue to be reviewed as part of the budget setting process to ensure that there is investment in the council's services and the servicing of the debt remains affordable.</p>
7.12	<p>Question from Cllr Brian Watkins Is the provision in the budget for the council's energy costs and the pay award for its staff sufficient as both are expected to be higher than originally budgeted for due to the country's financial crisis?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance Some inflationary pressures are currently higher than those provided for in the 2022-23 budget. These will be managed in the first instance by savings or one-off use of departmental reserves in 2022-23. The additional inflationary pressures will be reflected in the 2023-24 budget as part of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.</p>
7.13	<p>Question from Cllr Sharon Blundell It is starting to look as if the council's improvement in performance in getting education, health and care plans completed within statutory timescales has now stalled. Whilst the council's performance is now closer to the national average it will need at least another 30% of improvement to meet its 90% target. Do you consider that a further increase in resources is needed for the council to meet this stated target?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services We continue to work hard to improve our EHCP processes to increase performance, particularly in light of a rising level of demand. An additional 5 EHC Coordinators have been secured for the next year.</p>
7.14	<p>Question from Cllr Ben Price At a recent councillor briefing, councillors were informed that Norfolk was likely to run out of water between 2030 and 2040. Supply would be met through demand reduction (25%), piping in water from elsewhere, new reservoirs, and energy-intensive desalination plants. Anglian Water is currently losing 180 million litres of water a day due to poorly maintained infrastructure. Last year, its Chief Executive earned £1.3 million, and paid out £93 to its shareholders. Does the Cabinet Member agree that privatisation of water has failed, that it is putting water sustainability in Norfolk at risk, and that the solution is for the government to renationalise this precious commodity and natural monopoly?</p>

	<p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste Anglian Water is required by Government to publish its water management plans on a five-year cycle. With regulatory oversight provided by Ofwat, Anglian Water's proposed strategy outlines plans which aim to ensure water security for homes and businesses until 2050. This strategy recognises known risks and offers a range of costed measures to ensure we know the means by which water security is maintained. This is an open and transparent process involving consultation with all interested stakeholders.</p> <p>Second Question from Cllr Ben Price The UK's average land temperatures have risen by around 1.2C from pre-industrial levels, UK sea levels have risen by 16cm since 1900 and episodes of extreme heat are becoming more frequent. Only this summer we have seen temperatures exceed 40 degrees. Norfolk residents need to see NCC taking their public safety responsibilities seriously. Will the cabinet member agree to set up a working group with partners to develop a Hot Weather Plan for Norfolk?</p> <p>Response from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Waste The County Council's response to the hot weather is being addressed through those NCC Services directly involved with this work, including Norfolk Fire & Rescue Service, and also through the work of the Norfolk Resilience Forum.</p> <p>Our broader actions in terms of climate change have been recently reported to Cabinet and are also being addressed through the development of a Norfolk Climate Action Plan which the County Council will be developing in partnership with all the members of the Norfolk Climate Change Partnership (NCCP).</p>
7.15	<p>Question from Cllr Jamie Osborn Since the Conservatives took power in 2010, energy bills are up nearly 200%, council tax is up 31% and food prices are up 36%. Meanwhile, local government pay is down 27.5%.</p> <p>Rocketing inflation of up to 18% is only going to make this worse. Norfolk County Branch of Unison is campaigning against the local government pay offer for this year as it would yet again be a real-terms pay cut for frontline workers.</p> <p>Does the county council accept that another real terms pay cut for essential workers is unacceptable?</p> <p>Response from the Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategy and Governance The pay and terms and conditions of local government services' staff is determined by the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services.</p> <p>For 2022-23 the National Employers have made a one year offer of £1,925 increase on all NJC pay points which is currently being considered by the trade unions and their members.</p> <p>A balance has to be found between increasing pay and the ability of local government to accommodate the additional cost when balancing the budget and the impact on council taxpayers. If there is insufficient funding available to meet a pay increase, this is likely to come at a cost of jobs or service provision.</p>

Second Question from Cllr Jamie Osborn

Businesses from corner shops and chippies to manufacturers are warning they may have to close due to energy bills tripling, including in my division.

The Conservatives are failing small businesses. What action are you taking to help businesses, especially SMEs, reduce their energy bills? For example, I have previously called for a retrofit taskforce to help cut bills through insulation (the fastest way of cutting bills) and installing renewable energy.

Response from the Cabinet Member for Growing the Economy

We are working with the networks who support businesses, such as the Chamber, Federation of Small Businesses and New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership, to look at solutions, including within the supply chain. As mentioned earlier, we, and our partners, will signpost organisations to any support that the government introduces, through our websites and Growth Hub business advisers.

Longer term, as part of the Council's Green Skills approach, we are exploring a strategic partnership with The Retrofit Academy (TRA). In partnership with ourselves, TRA will draw together and manage the Norfolk Retrofit Training Consortium. The consortium will include employers, contractors and training providers, and will deliver a training development plan, to meet the demand for retrofit interventions.

More broadly, we are supporting the development of renewable energy, through our partnership with Great Yarmouth Borough Council, to build the Operations & Maintenance campus for the offshore wind sector, at Great Yarmouth.