

COUNCIL MEETING – 26 JULY 2010

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Questions were received under the following categories:

AGENDA ITEM 5 - COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT TIME**5. (ii) Questions with Notice by Members of the Council relating to Ward Matters and to Committee Chairmen****1. In Councillor Goldspink's absence, Councillor Saltmarsh asked the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning:**

Is the Cabinet Member aware of two serious accidents that took place recently on Oxney Road (21 June and 4 July), ironically after his own Highways officer addressed the Planning Committee on 8 June and the minutes record him as saying that the accident data that they presented was not wholly accurate as the data was taken from Police reports only; if incidents were not reported to the police they did not get fed back? Local residents often have information that the Highways Officers and the Police do not have, but a local resident who brought forward such information at that meeting was told that his evidence of the accident rate was 'conjecture'. Would he rather rely on residents' conjecture, or officers incomplete information, and what is he going to do to address this glaring gap in the information that Members are asked to base their planning decisions upon?

Councillor Seaton responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning using the following information:

I am aware of the two road traffic collisions that have occurred since the Planning Committee of 8 June.

The application for the building of flats was narrowly approved by the Planning Committee in accordance with planning policy, having heard both the professional views of the officers present and the views of the resident who addressed the committee.

Officers are unable to formulate their recommendations on the basis of information that would be regarded by the Planning Inspectorate as hearsay without exposing the Council to the risk of the decision being overturned on appeal.

A safety scheme was previously identified for this location and I am pleased to announce that this will go ahead as planned despite the reduction in funding allocated through the local transport plan.

The information used came from the Police and will not be referred back to the Planning Inspector.

2. Councillor Miners asked the Deputy Leader:

When Council officers authorise the removal of local trees, e.g. on verges/highways land, as happened recently in the Dogsthorpe ward (Eastern Avenue and Western Avenue) could all appropriate ward Councillors be notified of these proposals before action is taken? When Councillors have this information it is then easier to answer the various queries and questions always forthcoming from residents and we do not then have to give excuses and carry out endless chasing to secure replies that often lack detailed reasons for the removals.

Councillor Lee responded:

We are not aware of any trees being removed in Eastern Avenue or Western Avenue during the past year. There are proposals to look at removing three Leylandii in Central Avenue at the back end of the year once the nesting season has finished. The trees would then be replaced by native species that would be more appropriate. However, prior to that work being undertaken, consultation will take place with Ward Councillors.

Councillor Miners asked the following supplementary question:

Could officers ensure that the officer-Members protocol applies and that Ward Councillors are made aware of any actions to be undertaken?

Councillor Lee responded:

This issue should be raised with the relevant officers who would manage the planned works.

3. In Councillor Fower's absence, Councillor Shaheed asked the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning:

Given the announcements within the 'Peterborough Core Strategy – Recommended Changes To Gypsy And Travellers' by this City Council, and recognising the residential interest, in respect of planning application 10/00412/FUL (For 'Use of Land for One Extended Gypsy Family Comprising Two Residential Caravans And One Family Room Caravan'), along the Hurn Road and others, could the relevant Cabinet Member please inform me as to when the Inspector holding the examination is likely to conclude their findings, what assurances can we have that proper and full consultation will occur, and will there be any impact on existing applications, such as the aforementioned within the ward I represent of South Werrington and North Gunthorpe?

Councillor Seaton responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning using the following information:

The Peterborough Core Strategy and the Site Allocations documents had (until recently) the responsibility to identify suitable sites for development as gypsy and traveller pitches to meet the number of pitches specified for Peterborough in the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). With the scrapping of the RSS, there is a report on the agenda for this meeting of Council that recommends a change to the Core Strategy to the effect that no pitches are allocated (other than for transit sites). If these changes are approved by Council, they will be presented to the Inspector who is conducting the examination into the Core Strategy. We will not hear of the Inspector's findings until December 2010 at the earliest.

4. In Councillor Fower's absence, Councillor Shaheed asked the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning:

Church Street, leading through Werrington village, is showing severe signs of deterioration, especially along the stretch just outside the village church and the Community centre, including a manhole cover which is in desperate need of replacement before an accident occurs. Can the Cabinet Member let me know how this Council assesses such work requirement and whether this stretch of road is due to be addressed/repaired ?

Councillor Seaton responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning using the following information:

Church Street Werrington has been inspected and is structurally sound at the present time and would not warrant inclusion for further assessment. There are, however, localised issues, mainly around the manhole covers and we have had the open areas filled. A few manhole covers were found to be slightly low to the surrounding area and we have reported these to Anglian Water, who are responsible for these.

To my knowledge, neither of the above had been reported previously to the highway maintenance team and I would strongly encourage this type of report to be made direct to the team, so they can inspect and action to maintain highway safety.

5. (iii) Questions from Members to Representatives of the Police / Fire Authorities

1. Councillor John Fox asked the Council's representative on the Police Authority:

Prior to the general election, the Police Federation of England and Wales sent a message to all prospective parliamentary candidates (as well as serving MP's) asking for support in backing the 'Real Policing Pledge'. Will the Council's representative confirm our support for the Police Federation's aims and objectives and support their aim of providing a more professional service to our communities?

Councillor Fitzgerald's response included the following information:

The 'Real Policing Pledge' is a document that centres on five key pledges:

- Uphold the office of constable as the bedrock of modern policing;
- Maintain the number of warranted police constables in England and Wales;
- Ensure that all constables are adequately trained to do their jobs;
- Commit to maintain an effective ratio of police constables to support staff on community policing teams; and
- Honour the Police Negotiating Board.

Understandably, and most laudably, the 'Real Policing Pledge' focuses on the importance of police constables to the future of policing. Officer numbers, training, community policing, cutting unnecessary bureaucracy, pay and providing value for money remain of the utmost importance as the Police Authority and Constabulary plan together to face what is undeniably going to be a financially very difficult time.

The reality is that, on the advice of the Home Office, we are currently modelling a range of cuts – the lowest of which is a 17% cut in government grant, requiring a 25% budget reduction over 4 years. We currently face a £1.2m reduction in the current

year's budget that was unexpected and unplanned for and a deficit of up to £10m in 2011/12. Our total budget for the current year is now £128.8m.

Maintaining officer numbers is of primary concern to the Police Authority, but we cannot escape the fact that 80% of our total budget is spent on our workforce. It is not feasible to reduce police staff alone and maintain current service levels, since so many of our police staff are crucial in supporting 'frontline' staff. In reality, if we were to disproportionately reduce police support staff numbers there would be an impact on 'frontline' services.

Whilst the Police Authority and Constabulary continue to work together to minimise the impact on all our services and the communities they serve, the current public sector climate is one that does not lend itself to making promises that are simply not sustainable. We admire and support the principles of the Real Policing Pledge and will certainly endeavour to continue to provide as professional a service as we possibly can in the circumstances. However, the world has changed and we are unable to sign up to the detail of the document.

Councillor Fox asked the following supplementary question:

The main concern is the implication of reducing the numbers of police officers and how would the gap in provision would be met?

Councillor Fitzgerald responded:

The Members on the Police Authority will continue to support Peterborough's policing numbers as Peterborough was already under the national average for police officers per head of population.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – EXECUTIVE BUSINESS TIME

6. (i) Questions with Notice from Members to the Leader and Members of the Executive

1. Councillor John Fox asked the Cabinet Member for Community Cohesion, Safety and Women’s Enterprise:

The Government has announced that £1,000,000 is to be cut from the Police budget, which will have an obvious effect on the service that the Police will be able to provide to the general public.

Would the Cabinet Member consider an approach by the Council to the Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire Constabulary, respectfully suggesting that during this time of recession the force helicopter be kept in the hanger for a year or two and the money saved used for front line services instead, or does he / she consider that it is time to renew the call to Government to bring back the Peterborough Combined Force so that we have total control on how the budget for the Police is spent and the deployment of its officers is managed, for maximum effectiveness, efficiency, and the good of our residents.

The Cabinet Member for Community Cohesion, Safety and Women’s Enterprise responded:

We have consulted with the Police Authority who has confirmed that they have actually had to reduce their budget by £1.2m in the current year. The question asks that the money saved should be ‘**used for front line services instead**’. The helicopter is, of course, a major frontline resource which is regularly deployed to tackle crime and recover people and property in Peterborough.

The Police Authority has assured us that it already ensures best value for money from the helicopter by operating within an Air Consortium made up of three forces – Essex, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Each force owns its own aircraft but by working together they are able to share costs in relation to legal requirements, administrative matters, pilots and engineers. Currently there is a national air operations strategy under development which is looking at delivering this specialist service to the communities it serves, but in doing so reducing costs and expenditure. Cambridgeshire is part of this review and our consortium has been held up as an effective and efficient way forward to this national air operations objective.

Regarding the reinstatement of the Peterborough Combined Force, Government policy continues to move in the opposite direction. The Police Authority is being asked to consider greater collaborative opportunities with other forces and partner agencies as well as being asked whether or not to merge existing forces if police authorities and the public agree. To move to smaller forces would add to costs as a result of diseconomies of scale and therefore reduce value for money. The Force’s Northern Basic Command Unit, led by Chief Superintendent Andy Hebb, exists to serve Peterborough and involves Peterborough’s communities in its tasking and service provision.

2. **Councillor Goldspink had agreed to withdraw his question concerning Westcombe Engineering:**

3. **Councillor Sandford asked the Cabinet Member for Environment Capital:**

In response to a recent FOI request, I was told that over the past 12 months, the Council has removed over 16,000 sq. metres of hedges and shrubs in the city of Peterborough. In most cases these areas have been converted to intensively mown grass. The shrub removal has been going on progressively across the city for almost two years and hence seems to be a systematic shrub destruction programme and not just 'dealing with a few hazardous areas' as officers have previously claimed. Given that trees, hedges and shrubs provide important visual amenity, valuable wildlife habitat and help tackle climate change by removing carbon from the atmosphere and storing it, would the Cabinet Member agree that we should be planting significantly more trees, hedges and shrubs – not engaging in mass destruction programmes?

Would the Cabinet Member also agree that it does not make any financial sense either (at a time of likely severe budget cuts) given that research by the National Urban Forestry Unit (of which she has been sent a copy some months ago) clearly shows that intensively mown grass is the most expensive landscape management feature?

Councillor Lee responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Environment Capital:

Councillor Sandford is correct that we have dealt with over 16,000 square metres of shrubs in the past year, but not hedges as he suggests and that did not form part of his Freedom of Information question.

Virtually all of the shrubs and plant species that have been removed are self sets on roundabouts and sight lines or areas where shrubs are so old as to be unfit for purpose. Significant areas of shrubbery that have been removed include Laxton Square in front of the Passport Office where many old roses were removed in this instance because of the infestation of rats underneath the beds. Over 30 rats were trapped as part of that process. Other significant areas where shrubs have been removed include around the Boongate roundabout where the sight lines have been enhanced to improve personal safety, in consultation with the police, following two particularly vicious attacks on women. Many of our roundabouts have been beset with self set shrubs such as Elder, Buddleia, Lavatera, Sycamore and other non native species and these have been cleaned up. Examples include the roundabout in front of the Volunteer Fire Station which is now planted with low level ornamental trees improving safety for cyclists, pedestrians and motorists.

Councillor Sandford continually refers to a 12 year old piece of research undertaken by the National Urban Forestry Unit which specifically looks at trees or grass. Interestingly there is no mention in the report of shrubs. It is fair to say that the authors of this research hardly represent a broad spectrum of managers of urban open space and their suggestions are that most areas that are left to naturally become "treed" are cheaper to maintain than managed grassland. Whilst there is some truth in this, it currently costs over £1.25 per square metre per year to maintain shrubbed areas and under 15 pence per square metre to maintain grassed areas. These prices have been obtained through competitive tendering with both internal and external organisations. It is unfortunate that Councillor Sandford chooses to use a report on

natural woodland and compares it to mowed amenity grassland and takes no account of the individual locations where work has been undertaken.

The Council maintains and supports significant areas of natural woodland and has some excellent examples of both pioneer woodland, which is land that has been allowed to return to its natural state, and ancient woodland which is carefully protected because of the value of its species. However, the type of woodland that the Trees or Turf report suggest are Alder, Ash, Birch, Hawthorn, Oak, Rowan, Wild Cherry and Willow which are clearly trees as opposed to the self set shrubs which we have removed from a number of locations.

As a final word it is worth noting that Councillor Sandford's personal crusade does not have the sympathy of the Ward Councillors in the areas where the work has been undertaken and Ward Councillors have been very happy with the results and the response from most of their residents where the improvement works have taken place.

Councillor Sandford has absorbed many hours of officers' time in asking on-going, repeated questions, arranging site visits with the Commercial Services Director and the Chief Executive and raising Freedom of Information questions which detract from the resources available for the management of the Council's open spaces which in the past five years have been highly rated in the Anglia in Bloom Awards.

Councillor Sandford asked the following supplementary question:

Up to 1,100 trees have been removed by the Health Service Trust and the city council around the new hospital site, this goes against the council's own Trees and Woodlands Strategy. Why has this been allowed to take place?

Councillor Lee responded:

The council supports the planting of trees and it is always regrettable to remove them. However, the council does not support the creation of dangerous areas in the city resulting from overgrown and hazardous shrubberies.

4. Councillor John Fox asked the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning:

I would like to record my thanks for the quick and timely response to cleaning up the entrance to the Norwood Lane Travellers' Site. I believe this to be an annual burden on the taxpayers of Peterborough and would ask if the Cabinet Member agrees that some of this money would be better spent on covert surveillance equipment in order to catch the offenders. The previous administration has in the past given us assurance that this would happen, yet I still see no visible evidence of this and problems worsen each year. This matter needs to be dealt with in a determined and positive manner, otherwise the problems will continue

Councillor Seaton responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning using the following information:

A series of activities and interventions are being considered to tackle the ongoing problems on Norwood Lane, led by the relevant Neighbourhood Manager. As part of this work the Head of Environment, Transport and Engineering has put forward to the Head of Neighbourhoods estimates for improvements to the lane which may help in stopping the fly tipping that takes place. The Head of Neighbourhoods is currently

consulting with other partners, particularly the emergency services, to ensure that such changes do not cause any concerns.

The installation and use of surveillance equipment and the use of covert surveillance expertise is also currently being investigated and we have recently received quotations for both covert and overt cameras. It is our intention to take proactive enforcement action as soon as possible against key perpetrators to try to deter future flytipping and associated anti-social behaviour.

Councillor Fox asked the following supplementary question:

What is the annual cost of manually clearing up the site compared to the costs and actions resulting from the use of covert surveillance and CCTV?

Councillor Seaton responded:

The comparative costs will be compared to determine the most cost effective way of managing the problems at the site.

5. Councillor Miners asked the Cabinet Member for Resources:

Does the Cabinet Member support the recent call by the Local Government Association to the new Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition government to remove all 'ring fencing' for Council grants?

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded:

We welcome the Government's plan to give local authorities new discretion over £1.3 billion of ring-fenced funding and reduce the number of funding streams from central government from 110 to 94.

For Peterborough City Council, around £1.5m of grants have had their ring-fencing removed. However we should be under no illusion that this simply means we have extra cash to tackle the grant reductions and pressures we face. The grants in question relate mainly to adult social care and are being used to provide those services. Difficult decisions would have to be made if the funding were to be used for other services.

Overall however, this is a step in the right direction, but we would like to see it go further and have all ring-fencing removed.

Councillor Miners asked the following supplementary question:

What will this mean at a local level especially concerning Early Years funding and Child Care Services?

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded:

A written response will be provided to Councillor Miners.

6. In Councillor Fower's absence, Councillor Shaheed asked the Cabinet Member for Resources:

How many Cabinet Members have a 'blackberry' or similar device provided by the local authority and what is the monthly cost to local taxpayers?

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded:

Seven Members of the Cabinet have devices that allow a mobile e-mail and phone link. The average monthly cost is just over £30 per member.

7. Councillor Miners asked the Cabinet Member for Resources:

Noting the increasing restrictions on local government spending and the ability to employ officers, could the Leader please inform the Peterborough public how this will directly affect the various forms of 'enforcement' actions we have to apply throughout the unitary authority area? Examples include parking enforcement, houses of multiple occupation, the Environmental Protection Act, Licensing, etc.

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded:

The bulk of enforcement sits within the Operations Directorate.

The authority is reviewing its budgets in light of the recent government announcements and the forthcoming spending review. At this stage I do not feel it is right to comment ahead of this review as the same question could be asked of any area within the Council.

However, Members will be consulted during this process and I will be happy to consider Councillor Miners' views at any time.

Councillor Miners asked the following supplementary question:

Is the council therefore considering a reduction in front line enforcement services?

The Cabinet Member for Resources responded:

No. Strong enforcement action is important. However, to ensure best value for money is achieved, different options must be considered.

8. Councillor Ash asked the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning:

Since the recent changes in bus services, I have received many comments (mostly adverse) from residents in my ward. A motion was agreed by Council to investigate ways of bringing services up to a suitable standard for our city. Can the Cabinet Member tell me if the Council has been proactive in securing a quality public transport service and what measures can be taken to bring the public transport network up to the quality the city can be proud of?

Councillor Seaton responded in the absence of the Cabinet Member for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Planning using the following information:

As Councillor Ash is aware the council is not directly responsible for local bus services. Based on passenger numbers, approximately 94% of all bus services in Peterborough are provided commercially with the main bus operator, Stagecoach, holding approximately 77% of the market.

The Transport Act 1985 puts a duty on the council for it to provide those services that it deems socially necessary. The council currently provides the following:

Community transport services	£42,220
Local bus services – both urban and rural	£909,190
Park and ride	£29,000

The Long Term Transport Strategy refers to a number of improvements for public transport:

- Permanent park and ride sites;
- Information and publicity;
- Rural bus service frequency;
- Future Bus;
- Smartcard and other ticketing initiatives;
- Real time;
- Infrastructure and interchanges including bus stops and shelters; and
- Bus priority measures.

The funding for these schemes will come from various sources – developer funding, council revenue and transport capital funding. As yet these schemes have not been costed and at this stage, it is not possible to provide a ball park figure. However, as Cllr Ash will be aware this will require significant investment.

Councillor Ash asked the following supplementary question:

Should the council be proactive in improvements rather than waiting for Stagecoach to act?

Councillor Seaton responded:

The council and Stagecoach must work together to provide the best service for residents.