

## QUESTIONS ON NOTICE FROM MEMBERS OF COUNCIL

### (1) Question to the Board Member, Benefits and Customer Services (Councillor Susan Brown) from Councillor Jean Fooks

#### Accessing Council services

The latest edition of Tenants in Touch says that “the recent Council survey showed us that less than half of our readers have access to the internet”. What is the Council doing to make sure that tenants can access all council services on paper or by phone and are not disadvantaged by not having internet access?

**Response:** It is important to understand that the articles in Tenants in Touch which related to Computers, Communication and Learning were designed to encourage digital inclusion where tenants do not have access to the internet at home. Details of basic training opportunities were highlighted as were locations where the internet can be accessed in the community for free. Use of the internet to access Council services is complementary to the use of face to face, phone or written contact.

Through the work of the Customer First Programme, the Council has made great improvements to ensure the customer service we provide is enabling as many customers as possible to access our services. We have also actively sought customer feedback to inform service delivery:

- The Council has had a one number single point of telephone contact since 2011. This telephone number is widely published and over 270,000 calls are received by telephone each year to the Contact Centre Team. Staff, are trained in a wide range of services and over 90% of the calls received are dealt with by the team at that first point of contact without passing to the back office. There is also a 24 hour seven days a week automated payment telephone line, and an out of hours duty officer service, which handles urgent customer enquiries.
- There are two modern walk in customer service centres providing access to officers via appointment or “drop in” alongside self-service facilities. Between them these centres resolve queries for over 16,000 customers each year. The customer service centre is also available for partner surgeries and is being effectively used by Carers Oxfordshire and Shelter to introduce a one-stop-shop of local services.
- We recently took part in a mystery shopping exercise which tested both our face to face and telephone service. The feedback was really positive and is now being used to help shape services further.
- In addition, the Tenant Mystery Shopping Group has helped test our new telephone system options to ensure they are user friendly and comprehensive. The feedback on this exercise was really positive and they were satisfied with the changes we have made.

Over the next couple of months, we will be carrying out consultation with our customers to inform the next iteration of the Customer Contact Strategy. As part of the consultation we are engaging with customers to understand how they wish to access services and what we can do to improve access to services. This will cover all methods of contact including face to face, telephone and the website.

In addition, there is a specific questionnaire for tenants which as well as asking the same questions on accessibility, also asks them about their thoughts on the online reporting of repairs. This will enable us to develop this service in line with customer need and preferences.

We will also be identifying opportunities to further increase partnership working with those organisations who our customers may go to for advice, so giving additional “one-stop shop” style support as part of our service.

The objective is to enable and encourage customers to access our services using the most cost effective channels for them, giving us more time to spend serving customers who are not able to use electronic means.

**(2) Question to the Board Member, City Development (Councillor Colin Cook) from Councillor Craig Simmons**

St. Clements Car Park

As predicted, traders are suffering due to inadequate alternative parking provision during the St Clements Car Park redevelopment. The Council made a significant sum from the sale of the land - a price which local traders are now paying for with their livelihoods. What is the City Council doing to compensate traders for loss of revenue during the construction period and what more will the Council now do?

**Response:** The Council provided an additional car park, a 10 minute walk away, and worked with traders and local Councillors on a campaign to promote St Clements during the work. If traders feel they are suffering in the interim they can apply for business rates reductions if trading turnover is lower.

**(3) Question to the Board Member, City Development (Councillor Colin Cook) from Councillor Jim Campbell**

Planning: Consultation of Neighbours

Following a complaint about inadequate consultation in relation to a planning application in my ward, a Case Review was set up. The subsequent, excellent, report written by Clare Golden stated that a “number of important lessons had been identified”. In particular that: We must ensure that we provide more than one notice for applications which affect properties to the rear or on sides which happen to be located in different roads;

We must ensure that all Reports cover all relevant issues....The impact of developments on the garden area of dwellings must not be overlooked in terms of our assessment.

Recommended actions for the Planning Department included “the writing and adoption of a (new) site notice protocol” and the “provision of further training for all officers responsible for reviewing/clearing planning applications.”

Can the Portfolio Holder tell us whether these lessons *have* been learnt and whether the recommended actions *have been* carried out?

**Response:** The answer is yes. Protocol, training and practice all in place as per the report.

**(4) Question to the Board Member, Youth and Communities (Councillor Steven Curran) from Councillor David Williams**

Possible closure of Children’s Centres

Could the Portfolio holder outline the steps he has taken to persuade the County Council not to close the 15 Children’s Centre’s that they are proposing as a part of their cuts package.

**Response:** Local government has been forced to make some very difficult decisions, but we must not lose sight of the value of the services that are delivered. We do not believe that closing children’s centres where they are really needed is an acceptable course of action. These concerns have been made clear to county colleagues in an appropriate manner.

I would like to thank the Green Party for their concern over a Labour Party Flagship Policy. I personally have made my concerns clear to the Portfolio Holder on the County and clearly this administration is opposed to cutting Children’s Centres as we are in cutting other services to Young People such as Early Intervention Hubs. We recognise that difficult decisions need to be made by The County Council but cutting these services are not the right decision. I understand that hard and fast decisions have not yet been made and that the position of the Independents and The Green Party will be crucial to this issue.

**(5) Question to the Board Member, Education, Crime and Community Safety (Councillor Pat Kennedy) from Councillor Dick Wolff**

Alcohol Free Zones

Can you please explain how Oxford's Alcohol Free Zones are being policed?

**Response:** The whole of the city within the local authority boundary is covered by the Designated Places Order. That covers all public areas where there is an implied right of access to the public, even if they have to pay.

It is not an alcohol free zone. Police officers have discretionary powers which they are able to use if they think that alcohol may cause anti-social behaviour.

Police officers can confiscate the alcohol, opened or unopened, and failure to comply can lead to arrest.

This act does not apply to licensed areas which are covered by the Licensing Act 2003.

**(6) Question to the Board Member, Leisure Services (Councillor Mike Rowley) from Councillor Sam Hollick**

Policy on restricting use of City leisure facilities

What is the Council policy on banning members of the public from those City leisure facilities managed by Fusion?

Can the portfolio holder tell me how many people are currently banned?

Are any banned people prominent members of the Save Temple Cowley Pool campaign?

**Response:** Fusion Lifestyle, as the managers of our leisure facilities, are responsible for any decision not to allow particular individuals to enter leisure premises. They have the right to do this if the activities of an individual are spoiling the leisure experience for other users. We would expect such decisions to be taken only as a last resort and in a reasonable manner. At present there are six people restricted from using the leisure centres, all of these are on a temporary basis.

I would not comment on any particular case because the Board Member does not influence, and should not give the appearance of influencing, individual decisions.

However, from the point of view of policy oversight, I have no reason to believe that Fusion have acted unreasonably at any time.

**(7) Question to the Board Member, Cleaner, Greener Oxford (Councillor John Tanner) from Councillor Elise Benjamin**

Recycling Rates in 2012/13

Can the portfolio holder tell us the latest 2012/13 recycling rates in the City and how they compare to past years?

**Response:** The recycling rate for 2012/13 was 44.92%. The recycling rate for 2011/12 was 44.88%.

This shows an increase year on year of 0.04%. It should be borne in mind, that due to recent changes in national legislation we are no longer able to include street sweepings in our recycling calculation and from

March 2013 these are no longer included in our recycling figures. As a result Council agreed to a reduction in our original recycling target of 50% to 44%. Our current year's performance is 44.82%, which of course does not include sweeping arising's. At the same period last year our recycling rate was 45.64%, so in "like for like" terms, the recycling rate is still increasing. The main reason for this is that dry recycle continues to increase. The figure currently stands at 29.38% compared to 29.29% at the same point last year. This is thanks in part to the educational campaigns that have taken place across the city. Our Garden Waste service continues to grow and as a consequence composting tonnages have risen also adding to the recycling rate, although these obviously fluctuate seasonally and are weather dependent.

**(8) Question to the Board Member, Cleaner, Green Oxford (Councillor John Tanner) from Councillor Elise Benjamin**

Carbon emissions

Can the portfolio holder tell us why the Council's carbon emissions have increased this year and what is he doing to tackle the issue?

**Response:** This issue was discussed in the Green House Gas (GHG) emissions report that the council prepares for Department of Energy and Climate Change each summer, and is available on the council web site.

The Council exceeded its 5% year on year reduction in *calculated* carbon emissions by implementing a range of carbon reduction measures in the year. The carbon savings from these measures are calculated according to industry good practice for an average weather year, and exceeded the 5% target for the year.

In fact last year was not an average weather year. The harsher and longer winter in 12/13 was far more severe than in 11/12. When comparing, "heating degree days" for 12/13 were 37% higher than 11/12. The effect of this is - of course - that more energy was used for heating than the previous year resulting in more carbon emissions.

A higher increase in emissions would have been observed under the conditions experienced during 2012/13 without an established and successful energy/carbon management plan in place.

The council's carbon management programme has avoided wasted energy and reduced energy bills compared to what they would have been in the long harsh winter of 12/13.

**(9) Question to the Board Member, Finance, Efficiency and Strategic Asset Management (Councillor Ed Turner) from Councillor Craig Simmons**

Treasury Management

Can the portfolio holder say why he does not agree with raising the non-specified investment limit set out in the Treasury Management Report which will enable the Council to benefit from much higher rates of return from its savings (6% rather than less than 1%).

**Response:** Specified investments are investments in sterling with counterparties which would be not more than one-year maturity, with rated institutions that meet the council's minimum credit rating. These are considered low risk assets where the possibility of loss of principal or investment income is small.

Non specified investments are any other type of investment, i.e. longer than 364 days, variable rates, unrated building societies and property funds. These types of investment are more risky in nature and although are likely to attract higher returns, can carry a potential for loss of principal.

The current Treasury Management Strategy, which is agreed by Council and so which can be amended by councillors, allows for the Council to invest up to 25% of its current investment portfolio in non-specified investments, with limits on different types of investment ranging between 10% and 20%. It is a matter of judgement on the level of risk which an authority should carry dependant on a number of factors including the level of reserves and balances and the risk appetite of the council. In a number of authorities against which the council has benchmarked the level of non-specified investments ranges from 0% to 25%.

In Oxford City the current limit of 25% has been set taking the above factors into account and following consultation with the Councils advisors Sector and is considered to be a prudent.

When considering non-specified investments the Council is also required to consider the level of 'its core cash', or the amount of cash that will not be required in the short to medium term for cash flow purposes, since non-specified investments are generally long term in nature.

The Council does currently have £3 million in Property Funds together with £9 million in unrated building societies. Officers are currently looking to increase the amounts in properties funds in favour of building societies but will continue to work within the confines of core cash and the 25% limit. Obviously these levels can be reviewed as part of the Treasury Management Strategy.

**(10) Question to the Board Member, finance, Efficiency and Strategic Asset Management (Councillor Ed Turner) from Councillor Craig Simmons**

Blacklisting of workers

Will the board member join me in expressing their support for the GMB union's campaign that is calling on Councils to blacklist companies that have been guilty of blacklisting workers? Will they ensure that the Council follows the lead of Tower Hamlets in adopting a procurement policy to empower the Council to reject such companies?

**Response:** I absolutely support the GMB's campaign, and am happy to state that the procurement section has checked the Council's payment records against the organisations identified as having blacklisted, and can confirm that none of the listed organisations are Council suppliers.

Tower Hamlets includes a specific question in their Pre-Qualification Questionnaire requiring any supplier who proposes to tender for a contract to agree to prohibit the use of systematic compilation of information on trade unionists and their use to discriminate against those individuals because of their trade union membership or because of their involvement in trade union activity in compliance with The Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations 2010. I propose that we do the same thing here in Oxford.

**(11) Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Jim Campbell**

Remembrance Day Ceremony

I appreciate that this is more a County than a City issue but the presence of buses stuck at the entrance to Little Clarendon Street slightly detracted from what was otherwise a moving and important ceremony. Could you find out what notices were posted in Woodstock Road on the morning of Sunday November 10<sup>th</sup> to warn traffic coming towards the City Centre that they would need to take a diversion, as St Giles would be closed?

**Response:** The Remembrance Day ceremony and service was, on the whole, well organised and certainly provided a fitting focus for the citizens of Oxford to pay their respects to all those who have lost their lives in armed conflict. A sign at the junction of Woodstock Road and St Margaret's Road would, however, have been useful in notifying vehicles of the road closure and diversion and will be provided in future.

**(12) Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Jim Campbell**

Remembrance Day and International Links

This year there was a representative from Oxford's twin city of Perm attending the ceremony. Why was the wreath which had been requested not available, and what steps have been taken to apologise to him, and to the City of Perm, for this omission?

**Response:** A wreath had been ordered but was not delivered. Unfortunately, this was not noticed until shortly before the ceremony was due to start. The relevant Officer has already written to the Perm representative apologising for the absence of the wreath on the day.

**(13) Question to the Leader of the Council (Councillor Bob Price) from Councillor Ruth Wilkinson**

Workforce Travel Plan

How is the new Workforce Travel Plan being monitored?

**Response:** The new workforce travel plan is owned by the Head of HR & Facilities and it was recently endorsed by the Carbon & Natural Resources Members Board. Most of the actions in the Workforce travel Plan have already been achieved. The remaining items are reviewed on a monthly basis by the Head of HR & Facilities (such as use of pool cars, reduction in grey mileage, etc.). An update report will go back to the Carbon and Natural Resources Members Board at the end of the financial year.