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Questions for Full Council Monday 27th October 2008

Question to Cllr Beardsworth from Anjona Roy

Question 1

Does the Portfolio Holder for Housing consider that the Council is working sufficiently successfully in support Council Tenants with disabilities in their own homes?

Can the Portfolio holder explain why Mr William Marriott of 13 Glebeland Gardens is still waiting for an adaptation to his front door step to enable him to leave his house without assistance?

This issue has been ongoing the entire duration of the Portfolio Holder's tenure of office, but still does not seem to have been resolved.

Response

This administration has commissioned an additional £3.7 m of capital for Disabled Facilities Grants and Disabled Adaptations Scheme in the 2008/09 budget. This is enabling a massive backlog of applications to these schemes to be addressed and many people to live more easily in their own homes.

There remain constraints on our ability to meet the demand - largely because previous administrations failed to operate the Disabled Facilities Grant and Adaptations schemes correctly but also because of the additional workload releasing these extra resources has place on already hard pressed Occupational Therapists.

So, to answer ^{Miss} Mr Roy's first question, I am convinced that we are now dealing correctly and compassionately with individual applications and are making the resources available to correct the intolerable backlog that had been built up under previous administrations.

However, I will not be satisfied until the backlog of applications has been cleared and new applicants can be served quickly and efficiently.

Unlike Mrs Roy, I am unwilling to use individual cases for political gain. I have already written to Mrs Roy on the individual case she seeks to publicise.

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Question to Cllr Woods from Anjona Roy

Question 2

Following the Lord Justice Moses Judgment on hearing in the High court between Kaur and Shah versus the London Borough of Ealing on 29th July 2008, what steps is the leader of the Council taking to avoid litigation by undertaking equality impact assessments for policy decisions before they are taken?

Response

Generally speaking, in the high court case Ealing Council was found to have acted unlawfully because they formulated a policy before conducting an Equality Impact Assessment – in other words they put the cart before the horse.

This Council has put systems in place to ensure that Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) are carried out for all new policy proposals and these are reviewed as the policy progresses to ensure continued equality compliance.

Training and awareness initiatives have included equality training for managers under the leadership training programme, Equality Impact Assessment clinics to help managers to understand and conduct effective Equality Impact Assessments and a workshop on how to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment for managers which was held in September of this year. Managers have also been offered ad-hoc help as and when required.

Equality Impact Assessments are specifically included in the services equality plans and these form part of the Council's performance framework discussed in Corporate Performance Reviews.

I am therefore satisfied that all is reasonably being done to equip managers to comply with our equality duties.

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Question to Cllr Glynane from Kathryn Smith – probably Brendan

Question 3

Who took the decision to charge the Thorplands Brook Community Co-op Shop and the Kings Heath Need2Know shop rent for this year?

When was the decision taken?

Why were the organisations only informed of this issue in August this year, when the total rent between April and September was sought?

Was an equalities impact assessment undertaken on this policy change?

Response

Ms Smith may remember the circumstances surrounding the setting of this authority's budget in February 2007. There had been considerable detailed discussion, negotiation and compromise between the Political Groups to reach a sufficient consensus whereby this authority could set a legal budget in very difficult financial and political circumstances.

Just before the start of the budget meeting, Mrs Roy, then a Councillor, raised a completely new issue regarding the Thorplands Brook Community Co-op Shop and the Kings Heath Need2Know Shop. In doing so she very nearly destabilised a carefully constructed arrangement. The minutes of the meeting record:-

Councillor Roy then proposed a further amendment and in doing so declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest as a member of UNISON and as an employee of the Race Equality Council. The amendment was seconded by Councillor Conroy and was as follows:

- (D) "In addition in the context of the detailed Budget to vire £13,820 from Community Grants to Community Centres for the purpose of securing the rental costs of the Need 2 Know shop and the Thorplands and Thorplands Brook Community Co-operatives as independently managed community spaces."

NB Councillor Boss declared an interest as a Director of Thorplands Community Co-operative.

Councillor Hadland accepted this further amendment for incorporation into the Budget.

This change was passed with the rest of the budget. Its effect was to provide the Thorplands Brook Community Co-op Shop and the Kings Heath Need2Know Shop with rent free accommodation for one year.

So, in answer to Ms Smith's question, who took the decision to charge the shops rent for this year, Council as a whole took the decision based on the framing of the amendment by then Cllr Roy.

An equalities impact assessment was not undertaken as there has been no change in policy.

Council agreed to fund the rent for 2007/08. There was no funding agreement in place for this current financial year 2008/09. No application for a community grant was received by the Council and therefore they would be billed for rent for the first six months of the year in the normal manner.

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Question to Cllr Beardsworth from Norman Adams

Question 4

As or will, Northampton Borough Council put or be putting an expression of interest to The Communities and Local Government department for its sixth PFI bidding round.

Response

As has been widely publicised we hope to put an expression of interest to the Department of Communities & Local Government by 31 October 2008. Cabinet will meet on 30 October 2008 to decide whether to proceed with an expression of interest. If successful this would allow us to refurbish, rebuild or replace a number of council properties that have or will fall below the Decent Homes Standard.

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Question to Cllr Beardsworth from Norman Adams

Question 5

At the 7th March 2005 Council Meeting, you moved a motion (which received unanimous support) containing the following:

"This Council requests the formation of a new tenants participation panel at the earliest opportunity. The panel should be on a properly constituted basis that is representative of and fully accountable to our tenants."

Are you still of that opinion?

Response

Yes.

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Question to Cllr Beardsworth from Chris Swinn

Question 6

"How many Council Housing Surveys for type 2 Asbestos have been undertaken, and at what cost, and how many Council Dwellings has Asbestos been found and removed, and at what cost, in the period from 1st April 2008 to 1st October 2008?"

Response

To date there is £48,000 of a £90,000 budget spent on asbestos surveys and removals. Since April there have been 198 homes surveyed plus some ancillary areas such as lift shafts, boiler houses and additional communal areas.

There have been 6 urgent removals noted on these reports. In these cases the contractor also phoned to us immediately.

Removals take place under controlled conditions by a specialist company and so far have all been dealt with inside two days.

There is one case at the present which is proving problematic as it seems there is asbestos sheeting from a shed buried in the garden (probably by a previous tenant). The Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM) and our contracted surveyor are returning to site to test the whole garden so a removal strategy can be worked out. The tenant in question has been requested to refrain from digging the garden for now, but as he is keen to have a vegetable plot. We want and need to resolve this position as soon as possible.

Sixteen (16) tenants have refused access for an asbestos survey, after they had made appointments.

A further 15 tenants have asked to be taken off the surveying list before the appointment stage.

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Question to Cllr Woods from Cllr K Davies

Question 7

Is it the intention of the cabinet in the next financial to allocate money specifically for the removal of Delapre park bund or will bund removal now take place after May 2011?

Cllr Keith Davies

Response

Our intention is that the London Road bund – that is, the part of the bunding in Delapre Park within the direct control of Northampton Borough Council, should be removed. To this end we have been in discussions with English Partnerships who are, in principle, willing to take the material for use on the Ransome Road development site.

When English Partnerships (or their agents) are ready to take the material NBC will need to fund necessary inspection and works. This funding will be drawn from the appropriate reserve.

The timing of works is dependent on English Partnerships.

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Question to Cllr Glynane from Cllr J Capstick

Question 8

Can the administration give a pledge that Lings Forum will not be closed as a cost saving measure to fill the £7.2 million gap in the Council's finances?

Response

Work is well in hand to identify potential efficiency and other savings to address the budget pressures for financial year 2009/10.

It would, very clearly, be irresponsible for the administration to rule any particular option for savings in or out at this stage. Options will be brought for public consultation in December.

The Leisure & Culture Service is one of three identified by Cabinet for the first round of Strategic Business Reviews. One of the objectives of this review will be to identify how improved sports and leisure facilities can be provided for a rapidly growing town.

Northampton will need more and better sports and leisure facilities as it grows to a city of nearly 300,000 people – not less.

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Question to Cllr Crake from Cllr Larratt

Question 9

The portfolio holder will no doubt recall the question I put to her at full council on 21st July 2008, regarding the removal of the public bench formerly located on the junction of St. Edmunds Street, Alfred Street and Stockly Street. At that meeting, the portfolio holder gave assurances that we could expect to see a replacement bench installed in the near future.

Three months have now past and the bench is still to be replaced. Would the portfolio please explain why, as of 17th October, she has failed to provide a replacement bench, and again tell me when we can expect a replacement?

Response

There has been an unfortunate delay in obtaining the replacement bench. However, it has now been received by NBC and is programmed to be fitted on Tuesday 28th October,