Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 1

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Norman Adams

January 2010 the portfolio holder in response to a question on the monitoring of Asbestos left in situ – confirmed that 1104 properties had been registered with Asbestos in situ that would require regular monitoring, and that monitoring was in place.

What are the fixed intervals that monitoring will take place.

Mr Norman Adams

Response

The fixed interval that monitoring takes place is annually. The authority will send an asbestos statement to tenants (in the form of a letter) with specific details of asbestos in their home.

The letter will also ask them to let us know if there is any damage or if they have any concerns.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 2

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Norman Adams

Does the Portfolio Holder for housing recall the statement made on 24th May that discussions with CASPAR seeking their vacation of 2 St Lukes House would commence shortly?

And as that was some months ago could she please give the outcome of the discussions?

Mr Norman Adams

Response

Following discussions with CASPAR agreement has been reached to close the offices to the public from 10.9.2010.

There will be a short period of time to enable the team to remove their equipment etc. after 10.9.10. An inspection will then take place to assess the condition of the empty property and the works required to return the property back to a flat with a view to it being let at the earliest opportunity.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 3

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Mr Neil Clarke

a) Total number of Northampton Council homes sold since the introduction of “Right to Buy”?

b) Total capital recites received from the sale of the above?

Mr Neil Clarke

Response

The “Right to Buy” scheme was introduced by the Margaret Thatcher Government in 1980. The scheme enabled eligible tenants to purchase their council property at a reduced discount depending on their length of tenure.

The net proceeds were split between central Government (75%) and the local Authority (25%)

The Council’s records are incomplete going back to the inception of RTB in 1980. Since December 2000 the Council has sold 1918 properties through the RTB legislation. (source Legal Services records).

b) Records show total receipts from the 1918 RTB sales of £77.7m. (of these only 25% would have been usable by the Council.)

In 2008 the Liberal Democrat administration change the policy of this council to ring fence all capital receipts from Right to Buy within the HRA. Since the change of policy in April 2008 the value of RTB sales to 31st March 2010 has been £1.8m making available £485k within the HRA to address the back log of Decent Homes Standard work within the retained housing stock.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 4

Question to Councillor Perkins from Mr Neil Clarke

The sale of Cliftonville House and the recent statements that the authority is looking at all possible ways to address the fact that OVER 50% of its housing stock is non decent.

What % of the capital from this sale will be used for Housing Revenue Account capital expenditure?

Mr Neil Clarke

Response

The use of capital receipts for any project must go through a proper capital appraisal process and at this point the only use of the capital receipt from the sale of Cliftonville House that has been agreed is the refurbishment of areas of the Guildhall and upgrade of technology.

David Perkins
Portfolio Holder for Finance
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 5

Question to Councillor Crake from Councillor Larratt

A recent deal with Avon and Northampton General Hospital to reserve spaces in Midsummer Meadow car park means that of the 245 parking spaces only 1 coach bay and 25 parking spaces (approx 10%) are currently available for the general public.

While it is important to maximise income, why are so few spaces in this car park being left available for public use when it is so popular among visitors to the hospital and Becketts Park as well as some shoppers, especially Christmas shoppers?

Although the coach park facility is used infrequently, with there now being only one coach bay available within the car park, where does the portfolio holder now envisage coaches and other such vehicles parking within the central area of town?

Will the portfolio holder agree to redress the balance of parking spaces within Midsummer Meadow car park at the earliest opportunity in order that all members of the public wishing to use the facility can do so?

Response

The historical casual parking occupancy rates at Becketts Park have been very low and contract parking arrangements were introduced by the then Conservative administration in January 2005.

These arrangements have been carefully managed, balancing the needs of casual visitors and the certain income to the Council from Contract Parking. The current contractual arrangements include both long and short term arrangements.

The current short term arrangements with Avon for 70 spaces will be reviewed at the end of September and thereafter on a monthly basis.

Decisions will continue to be made balancing the needs of the casual visitor including over the Christmas period and the very welcome income to this council from Contract Parking.

Trini Crake
Portfolio Holder for Environment
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 6

Question to Councillor Crake from Councillor Pai athorpe

In regards to market stall rents, can the portfolio holder please tell me what increases there have been to market stall rents over the last twelve months, and what consultation was carried out with the stall holders prior to any increases?

Response

The market stall rents are not determined as part of the Council's annual budgetary process. Rent increases and decreases are determined by the Market Consultation Group which is a cross party group advised by the Town Centre Manager.

The Market Consultation Group includes representatives from the market traders as well as Cross Party representation and consultation with stall holders on this and other matters is therefore via their representatives.

Increases were agreed by the Market Consultation Group in 2003 and 2006 but were subsequently reduced later in 2006. Since 1st October 2006 there have been no increases or decreases in the market stall charges.

Trini Crake
Portfolio Holder for Environment
Question 7

Question to Councillor Perkins from Councillor Palethorpe

Northampton Borough Council has civic responsibility to help local businesses by giving them preferential treatment in regards to awarding contracts. Not only does this direct cash to local companies, but also helps create and maintain desperately needed jobs.

Would the portfolio holder agree to review the council’s policy on awarding contracts to small and medium sized local businesses with the aim of meeting, and eventually exceeding the Government’s 23% target, and issue regular progress reports?

Response

Northampton Borough Council has a statutory responsibility to ensure fair, open and transparent processes when awarding contracts. The Council takes steps to ensure that local businesses have an equal opportunity to tender for contracts by the following actions:

- Advertising contracts on the local portal www.sourcenorthamptonshire.co.uk
- Publishing selection and award criteria with each tender document
- Encouraging the requirement for relevant community benefits to be specified in tender documents, for contracts which are best delivered by local businesses to ensure they have the best chance of success

The council can confirm that in 2008/2009, 49% of Northampton Borough Council’s aggregate spend was with SMEs. 13.5% of Northampton Borough Council’s aggregate spend was with SME’s described as local. The Council’s procurement team will be measuring these statistics and will publish trends on the council’s website by the end of this calendar year and on a quarterly basis thereafter.

Note for Councillor Palethorpe: “ Preferential treatment on the basis of locality is not permissible under the Public Contracts Procurement Regulations 2006”

David Perkins
Portfolio Holder for Finance
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 8

Question to Councillor Hoare from Councillor Clarke

What percentage of reported fly-tipping is removed by the council within two working days?

Response

Councillor Clarke has expressed his concern in a number of forums that the measurement of NES09 'The removal of fly-tips within two working days' as reported by this council was not accurately reflecting reality across the town.

This is an indicator of performance that is no longer required by Government but this council believes that it should be retained as local indicator. The measurement of performance is compiled across various categories of open space i.e. general open space, highways and housing land and so the base data needs to be recorded by more than one service department.

In support of the Councils data quality ambitions it has been decided to undertake a comprehensive review of the recording and measurement arrangements of this indicator.

This information was provide to Cllr Clarke in my emails of the 1st and 2nd September

Until we have completed this review and can be confident of the data quality we have suspended the reporting of this local performance indicator.

Brian Hoare
Leader of the Council
Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvement
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 9

Question to Councillor Perkins from Councillor Clarke

What involvement has the portfolio holder and/or the council had in the personnel procedures and practices of The Friends of Delapre Abbey?

Response

The personnel procedures and practices of The Friends of Delapre Abbey are the responsibility of the Trustees of the Charity and neither myself, nor the Council has played any part in the formulation or application of such procedures and practices.

David Perkins
Portfolio Holder for Finance
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 10

Question to Councillor Church from Councillor Clarke

Is the filtration system in Market square Fountain sufficient to deal with cryptosporidium parvum parasite infection from birds and animals, if not why not?

Response

No standard drinking water treatment works, swimming pool treatment plant or water feature plant can fully guarantee removal of cryptosporidium parvum. However, there have been 14 number outbreaks of cryptosporidium in 1,500,000,000 pool attendances. (figure taken from the Institute of Sport and Recreation Management).

The Market Square fountain is a decorative water feature as part of a public realm project but includes the design safety features that an integrated water feature would have. The safety features included on the Market Square waterfeature are sand filtration, bromination and chlorination as recommended by the Pool Water Treatment and Advisory Group. These are the same design safety features as Dares Camp swimming pool.

The water is treated as swimming pool quality water from a management point of view and managed accordingly.

Asset Management will carry out microbiological testing. Environmental Health and the Water Hygiene Centre are satisfied with the testing regime. The testing regime meets with the Institute of Sports and Recreation Management recommendations. These recommendations and those of the Pool Water Treatment and Advisory Group (which specifically include interactive water features) are available on request.

There are small risks to health and safety from any of the very wide ranging leisure facilities provided by the council. Those risks can never be eradicated entirely, but the Council has taken every reasonable precaution against those risks in relation to the fountain.

Richard Church
Portfolio Holder for Planning & Regeneration
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 11

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Councillor Hawkins

The County Council will be considering proposals for the future of Support Funding at their September Cabinet. We are concerned that any reduction in the current levels of Supporting People grant that we receive from the County Council will impact on some of our most vulnerable customers and in particular, the Sheltered Housing Service.

In view if the expressed concern, will the Portfolio Holder for housing provide clear and up to date information to Full Council about the likely impact on vulnerable customers and in particular the Sheltered Housing Service. What is she doing about these concerns?

Response

I am very concerned about the future of support funding and its impact particularly on sheltered housing residents.

There is a great deal of uncertainty currently and it is difficult to say with any clarity yet what the impact might be. Regular discussions are taking place with colleagues at the county council and they are aware of the timescale of our sheltered housing review which is being discussed at Cabinet on Wednesday.

If the recommendations in this report are agreed, the consultation on the review will be complete by December. I anticipate that by then we will all be clear about the difficult budget decisions the county council has to make and the future direction of support related funding.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 12

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Councillor Hawkins

Will the Portfolio Holder for Housing kindly explain the policy context that has led to the rejection of my suggestion for positive use of derelict land in Northwood Road? Why has a suggestion for building singly person dwellings on this site been ruled out offhand as impossible?

What is the policy which sets out priorities for future housing development and potential new building in the Borough?

Response

The Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2010 for West Northamptonshire states that Northampton requires more family accommodation. Some new build developments, both market and affordable have suffered recently from lack of demand of single 1 bed flatted type accommodation.

The recently approved Housing Strategy 2010-15 sets out the priorities for future housing development.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 13

Question to Councillor Hoare from Councillor Mirkin

The Coalition Government’s Minister for Planning visited Northampton on Friday 3rd of September. It was reported in the media that he stated that the West Northamptonshire development Corporation (WNDC) will be closed down "reasonably soon".

However, it has been suggested that this quango could remain in place until late 2012 or 2013. Further, the Member of Parliament for Northampton South stated that the planning responsibilities cannot be handed back owing to a lack of expertise within the council.

Does the Portfolio Holder agree with assertions that this council lacks the necessary capability to take back these planning responsibilities?

Additionally, does he not agree that the dismantling of this expensive and unwanted quango should be commenced forthwith?

Response

Brian Binley MP arranged a visit by Bob Neil on Friday 3rd September. Along with the Portfolio holder for Planning & Regeneration I was invited to attend a meeting with various MP’s and local Councillors.

At the meeting the minister made it clear that he did not have direct responsibility for WNDC. Andrew Stunell the Minister with responsibility for WNDC is scheduled to visit Northampton at the end of September. I look forward to accurate reporting in the local press of any Ministerial comments at that time.

A proposal for the return of development control powers on new developments up to 199 houses and most developments within the town centre with effect from April 1st 2011 is being taken to cabinet on Wednesday 15th September in accordance with the outcome of the mid term review of WNDC concluded by the previous government.

We have made it clear that we would welcome the return of all the remaining planning powers at the earliest opportunity, subject to the our planning service building the additional capacity to deal with very major applications. The sooner we can achieve that, the better. Our Planning Service does not lack capability but will need to increase its capacity in respect of assessing large, complex planning applications.

The importance of WNDC in attracting public investment in our town’s infrastructure, particularly in the town centre, should not be underestimated. We would support its replacement by a local body accountable to local government, and it would seem that view is shared by the government. The timetable for that transition is 2013/14 according to the review, but it could be sooner.

Brian Hoare
Leader of the Council
Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvement
Question 14

Question to Councillor Hoare from Councillor Mildren

Will the Leader of the Council confirm that contingency plans are in hand to safeguard the vulnerable in Northampton, pending the announcement of the detailed results of the Comprehensive Spending Review, expected on 20 October, and the expected cuts to local government funding?

Response

Councillor Mildren will be aware of the challenging budget position that all councils face in the next few months. This council provides a wide range of support to the vulnerable residents and our services have been assessed against nationally defined standards designed to ensure high quality services. We have been assessed as demonstrating good practice and working towards excellence.

Some of the funding streams to provide these services are provided by external agencies and we are not in control of the budget decisions that those organisations may make. If funding streams are removed by other agencies there would clearly be issues with the future provision of these services.

In these challenging times councils need to improve their joint working to work smarter and in a more co-ordinated manner. This council is working on proposals to work in partnership with other key agencies to improve the effectiveness of our services.

This council is up for the challenge but no one should underestimate the scale of this challenge and its potential implications.

Brian Hoare
Leader of the Council
Portfolio Holder for Partnerships & Improvement
Questions for Full Council Monday 13th September 2010

Question 15

Question to Councillor Beardsworth from Councillor Mildren

The lead letter in the Chronicle and Echo on Saturday 4 September regarding the experiences of a resident of Sheltered Housing was disturbing to read.

No doubt the Portfolio Holder will have investigated this herself, but will she give an assurance to this council that the excellent suggestion made by the author of the letter will be given every consideration.

The suggestion is that pre-inspections of sheltered housing properties, prior to future residents moving in, be made by or in association with those with direct experience of the problems that elderly and disabled people may face.

Response

It is the policy of this Council not to do certain types of work before a new tenant moves in.

A full list of repairs to be done on occupation is supplied to the new tenant and work done within the first couple of weeks. This is fully explained to the prospective tenant when they are taken to view the property with their housing officer.

By doing things this way we are able to reduce the amount of time properties are left empty and therefore provide a much wanted home for someone on our housing register more quickly. I understand that the issue that was reported in the letter to the newspaper has since been addressed.

Sally Beardsworth
Portfolio Holder for Housing