

Councillor Questions for Council 15th February 2011

(NOTE: The following questions and answers will be published on the Council's website as soon as possible after the meeting and linked to the published draft minutes of this meeting.)

1. Question from Councillor Stephen Hedges

1. Could the Cabinet Member say how many people have been on the waiting list for 2008, 2009 and 2010?
2. What is the longest time that the department has identified for a home being empty?
3. How much in budget has been allocated to bringing empty houses into use?
4. What target has the Cabinet Member set for bringing empty homes back into use? That is, coming back into use by direct action from the Council, not by normal means
5. Will he use the Council's compulsory purchase powers to deal with the worst offenders?
6. What if any are, funding streams likely to be forthcoming from the Government to assist in bringing homes back into use?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Adult Social Services and Housing

1. On 1st April 2008 – 6,560
On 1st April 2009 – 6,990
On 1st April 2010 – 8,800

It should be noted that, in line with the current legislative framework, Bath & North East Somerset has an "open" waiting list and these figures do not represent a measure of housing need in the area. Indeed, many people on the waiting list do not have a current need for housing or even a wish to move at this time.

2. Council Tax Records provide a default date of 2004. However, Housing Services are aware of some properties that have been empty for in excess of 30 years.
3. Housing Services have, following a process of reviewing their strategic priorities in consultation with me, freed up capacity to dedicate 0.5FTE to Empty Property recovery. There is no specific capital budget allocated to empty property recovery. In accordance with our Empty Property Policy any formal recovery action, such as, Compulsory Purchase Orders or Empty Dwelling Management Orders, would require my formal approval and be funded through Housing Services existing funding stream.
4. Suitable, and appropriately benchmarked targets, are to be developed for 1st April 2011.
5. The Empty Property Policy states that:

"Housing Services will then consider the use of enforcement action in the following circumstances:

- (1) The Council has made numerous attempts to engage with the owner, all reasonable offers of assistance have been made to the owner and these offers have not been acted upon; and
- (2) There is no prospect of the house being brought back into use by the owner within a reasonable time period; and
- (3) There is a housing need and/or the property is causing a significant problem in the local neighbourhood; and
- (4) A cost-benefit analysis demonstrates that enforcement action is both financially viable and appropriate.

Enforcement action to bring the property back into use will only be taken when the above criteria is met. Enforcement action with significant financial implications will only be taken following a single member decision by the Executive Member for Adult Social Services & Housing. Should the case for enforcement action not be demonstrated then no enforcement action will be taken.”

As such I will make this decision based upon the facts of the case whilst having regard to the above policy statement.

6. There are two potential funding streams – the New Homes Bonus (NHB) and £100m of Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) funding for Registered Providers (RPs).

We are still waiting for the NHB guidance. However, we expect that the Council would receive a funding bonus equal to 7 years of Council Tax Benefit for the net number of empty properties brought back into use, that is, after offsetting for new properties becoming empty.

The £100m funding stream has been allocated to the Home & Community Agency (HCA). It is for RPs, that is, developing Housing Associations, to bid for this funding and is linked to the new Affordable Rent Tenancy model. The money does not come to the Council and Councils are not eligible to bid. We have written to our local RP partners encouraging them to bid for the funding and offering our assistance.

2. Question from Councillor Brian Webber

Would the Leader of Council please provide a statement on the survey which I believe has been carried out into the condition of Pulteney Bridge?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

The routine condition survey recently carried out on the bridge has flagged-up issues with corroding sections of concealed iron which are causing expansion cracking to part of the bridge resulting in relatively localised cracking to the facade.

The primary consideration is to deal with the defects whilst preserving the historic fabric which may mean utilising cathodic protection systems rather than physical intervention/removal.

3. Question from Councillor Brian Webber

How are the discussions with bus companies progressing with regard to extending services along Great Pulteney Street?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

The Council is in continuing negotiations with bus operators over the possibility of extending commercial bus services along Great Pulteney Street to Laura Place.

The Bath Bus Company currently operates a 60 minute service along Great Pulteney St., with more services provided during the summer months depending on demand. There is already an outbound bus stop on Great Pulteney St. and a bus stop at Laura Place for passengers to use and the Council is investigating the possibility of providing a new inbound stop near the eastern end of Great Pulteney St. to allow passengers to travel in both directions along Great Pulteney St.

In addition the Council is considering the possibility of increasing Dial a Ride capacity in the area to serve the needs of passengers with reduced mobility.

4. Question from Councillor Brian Webber

When does the Cabinet Member expect to begin public consultation on an updated policy on A-Boards?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

Informal consultations with various stakeholder groups (e.g. Equality B&NES, retailer groups, residents and a number of Elected Members) expressing an interest in the issue of regulating obstructions on footways (including A Boards) has informed a draft policy.

My intention is that the draft policy will be formally consulted on as follows:

Circulate final draft copy to officers (including Legal, Highways and Licensing officers) for comment - week beginning 14th February;

Circulate draft policy for external comment - week beginning 28th February;

Draft policy to go to the Licensing Committee on the 28th March for their comment (as it is proposed that their role will include considering any "objected to" applications);

Consultation to end on the 31st March;

A report will then come to me in April so that I can make a decision on whether to adopt a policy and determine the detail (including fees and charges) behind this.

As the decision will fall into the period leading up to the Council Elections, I will ensure that the Group Leaders are consulted and agree any decision before I take a decision for implementation.

5. Question from Councillor Ian Dewey

Can the Cabinet Member please update me on the progress he has hopefully made on the HGV Ban at Cleveland Bridge. What is the proposed timescale for implementation? What are the possible blockers?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

The reason that the Council has not yet been in a position to implement the HGV ban is due to the fact that Cleveland Bridge lies on the Primary Route Network (PRN) in B&NES. The implication of the DfT's interpretation of EU legislation is that before a weight limit can be introduced for environmental reasons, Cleveland Bridge should be removed from the PRN.

Following the publication of the recent White Paper on transport, a consultation has recently commenced on how local communities can take greater control over roads in their area. The consultation document describes a new process by which the Council, as the local highway authority, could decide to remove Cleveland Bridge from the PRN where direct traffic between two locations linked by the PRN is too low to justify a primary route or that the journey of broadly similar convenience is possible through other sections of the PRN.

This is positive move forward which the Council shall be pursuing with a view to implementing a weight limit on Cleveland Bridge.

6. Question from Councillor Ian Dewey

The state of the A4 road between Bath and and the Council's Boundary with Bristol at Hick`s Gate was in a quite appalling state a few days ago with large amounts of litter on the verges and central reservations. I have also been chasing the litter picking of the A46 and A36 in my Ward, without success. Please advise what schedules, if any, are adhered to for this cleaning and who is monitoring the cleanliness. It is not a good advert for Visitors to Bath and NE Somerset.!

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

An extensive litter pick of the Keynsham bypass was undertaken on Monday/Tuesday 7th/8th February 2011. The Council's Environmental Services Division co-ordinates this work to ensure it is carried out in the safest and most cost-effective way. The two days lane closure and traffic management arrangements for this operation on the Keynsham bypass cost over £2K.

Environmental Services are currently investigating the cost of purchasing the necessary traffic management equipment and putting in place the required safety training to enable the cleansing team to provide a more proactive and timely response to this problem. This would ensure that urban and rural verges and gateways and approaches to Bath and North East Somerset are maintained in an attractive and welcoming manner throughout the year for residents and visitors.

The cleansing schedule for the A46 and A36 is on a 14 day cycle throughout the year, as prescribed in the Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse. Litter picking is normally coordinated as part of grass cutting operations Litter on rural verges, outside of the grass cutting season, is normally dealt with as part of winter scavenging operations by the Council's cleansing team. However in the case of major roads such as the A46 and A36,

where lane closure is required for safety reasons, the situation is more complicated as the Council has to liaise with InterRoute (the Highway Agency's contractor) which slows the response time considerably and adds to the cost.

It is worth emphasising the point that most of the roads mentioned here are under the overall management responsibility of the Highway Agency who provide no funding for local authorities to keep them cleansed and refuse to accept responsibility for cleansing, which means that the cost of clearance falls back on the Council in its role as the principal litter authority.

In order to combat the problem of littering, the Council has also embarked upon a major litter reduction campaign over the past 6 months and is increasing enforcement activity following an educational and publicity campaign.

7. Question from Councillor Ian Dewey

Can I please be informed of the Terms of Reference for the Transport Commission?
When is the first meeting to be held please?

Answer from Cabinet Member for Service Delivery

Draft terms of reference are under consideration by the Chair of the Transport Commission. A further informal meeting is scheduled for Friday 18th February when it is hoped to approve terms of reference, which can then be published.