

COUNCIL – 27TH FEBRUARY 2012

ITEM 5 QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

5.1 Councillor Seaton – Help for the Homeless

With the advance of winter and the recent plummeting temperatures thoughts focus on the unfortunate circumstances some people find themselves in, especially those who find themselves homeless. What is the Council doing toward lessening the impact of homelessness and ensuring that practical and sustainable help is being given?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

The Council's Housing Officers operate an emergency out-of-hours rota throughout the year and when people call the Council's out of hours telephone number the service contacts the duty Housing Officer who will explore with the client, the circumstances under which they find themselves homeless. If there are no alternative temporary housing options available through family members or friends, and if it is apparent to the officer that the Council may have a duty to the client under the homelessness legislation the client is booked into bed and breakfast accommodation until at least the next working day, when an appointment will be made with a Housing Officer to conduct a more detailed assessment.

In periods of severe weather where the temperature is forecast to be zero degrees or below for 3 consecutive nights the Housing Officers are empowered to make temporary arrangements outside of the normal legislative constraints for roofless people (rough sleepers) in order to prevent harm to those individuals. This accords with government guidelines on Severe Weather Emergency Protocols (SWEP) which operate outside the usual eligibility and entitlement frameworks that govern access to housing. The arrangements can therefore be applied to all those who may otherwise be excluded from services including people with no recourse to public funds, people who may have previously been banned and those with no local connection. Targeting of particular individuals is done on the basis of need and not on-going housing entitlement and the Housing Officers have access to a number of agencies for intelligence on the extent of rough sleeping in the Borough.

During the recent cold spell the Housing Officers made temporary bed and breakfast arrangements for 2 such clients

5.2 Councillor Seaton – Celebration of the 2012 Games

With the Olympic Games fast approaching and the inevitable interest that comes from having an active and supportive role in Loughborough toward the games: could the Council please inform as to what events have been arranged in the

build up to the Olympics that will enable Loughborough to celebrate its involvement in the games and to encourage a healthier lifestyle?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

We have a wide range of Cultural events that will enable Loughborough's residents, its visitors and wider communities to come together to celebrate the Olympics and in turn encourage an active lifestyle.

- *The key locations for the Torch Relay route on 3rd July have now been announced and include; Quorn, Loughborough, Hoton and Wymeswold. The street detail of the route will be confirmed later in the year and local residents will be invited to welcome the Olympic Flame in various locations. The Olympic Torch relay will shine a spotlight on the people and places of Charnwood.*
- *We also have the very special privilege of taking part in the only dress rehearsal in the Country for the torch relay which will take place on the 20th April.*
- *Welcome World Week -2nd June – 10th June A whole week of events supported by the community have now been put together in the lead up to our Cultural Olympiad event "Games Time" under the banner of "Welcome World Week." Highlights include: Charnwood Matsuri on Queens Park (Loughborough University Japanese and local arts day) Picnic in the Park, The Big Lunch. A World Food and Craft Market, A Sporting Life Exhibition at Charnwood Museum and Loughborough Mela. During the week flag and banner making workshops will be held in various locations to help with town and community dressing in celebration of the Olympics and the Queens Diamond Jubilee. Welcome world week will also encompass celebrations for the Queens Diamond Jubilee starting on the 4th June.*
- *Games Time combines music, dance, video, fireworks and professional dancers, and is inspired by the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It is being produced in partnership with Charnwood Borough Council, Leicestershire County Council, Charnwood Arts, Loughborough University and Spark Children's Arts Festival.*
- *It features high profile professional contributors, including artistic director Lea Anderson, the renowned contemporary dance director, costume makers Mahogany (Notting Hill Carnival) and pyrotechnic experts Walk the Plank.*
- *It gives volunteer participants from Leicestershire a "once in a lifetime" chance to learn new skills including dance, costume making and set designing, as well as seeing how a large outdoor show is put together and performing on the night.*
- *A Big Screen has been booked for the duration of the Olympics and will be located in Loughborough Market Place. Community organisations are working together to provide family friendly events, e.g. Loughborough Churches will provide a Family fun day and local businesses will support Loughborough by the Sea with an Olympic themed activity.*

The Sport and Active Recreation Team will be delivering a range of sport and physical activity programmes / events linked to the Olympic Games aimed at encouraging healthier lifestyles including:

- *Sport Relief, a 1, 3 and 6 mile run, on 25th March, starting at Market Place in Loughborough with approximately 500 runners expected.*
- *To celebrate 100 days to the Olympics the Team will be hosting several community based events on Saturday 21st April, in Loughborough, Syston and Mountsorrel. These events will include local sports clubs, leisure centre activity demonstrations and family fun day type activities.*
- *The 6 week summer holiday activity programme will be Olympic themed and support other events such as Loughborough by the Sea.*
- *Working in partnership with Charnwood Sport and Active Recreation Alliance a scheme is being run to get the 1948 Olympic Torch to all primary schools in the borough. The programme includes offering physical activity sessions and Olympic themed assemblies. Schools are then issued with an Olympic Resource pack which includes ideas on types of activities to deliver to primary school children in the run up to the Olympics. Activities include; Making a torch and running a mini torch relay event, activities around the Olympic values what they are and how they are relevant in day to day life and encouraging young people to have ago at Para Olympics sports i.e. sitting volley ball.*
- *As part of the National Active Challenges route initiative 40 short walking routes across Leicestershire and Leicester have been identified to encourage people who are not currently active to find a place near by where they live for a short walk... The final walk will be held on the day of the Opening Ceremony.*

5.3 Councillor Seaton – Financial Reserves and Investing in the Housing Stock

Given the financial uncertainties that we face in the future, is the present level of reserves held by this council adequate, bearing in mind that a major emergency could quite easily cost around £1 million? Also once the council takes on the housing debt that will enable the council to be released from the annual subsidy paid to national government from rents collected from the borough, how do you envisage the councils ability in coping with any increases in interest rates; again bearing in mind that even a 1% rise would cost the council an extra £800K per annum.

What method do you intend to adopt to mitigate the risk and will the Council have any capacity to invest in housing Stock over the next four years, if so how much?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

The level of General Fund reserves is considered each year and for the moment the £1m minimum level is still considered adequate. However, as part of the review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy in the autumn of 2012 this level will be reconsidered in the light of changes to the funding system for the Council which commence in 2013 as well as the possible impact of the next central government Comprehensive Spending Review.

The interest charge in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2012/13 includes an allowance for a half per cent increase in interest rates above those that existed on 24 January 2012. At present interest rates are still within this limit. Should they rise above this limit by 26 March 2012, when the rates will be fixed, then the amount to be contributed to Capital Expenditure would be reduced to cover the extra cost. This contribution to capital is over £2.3m, nearly £1.97m higher than in 2011/12, and is sufficient to cover any but the most exceptional changes in interest rates.

It is intended at present to borrow the money on fixed rates due to their current low levels. Should interest rates rise significantly by 26 March 2012 then variable rates would also be considered.

The 30 HRA Business Plan assumes an investment of nearly £51m over the next four years which is £28m more than the amount expected to be spent over the last four years to 31 March 2012.

5.4 Councillor Smidowicz – Projected Expenditure

Given the annual increase in The Retail Price index to December 2011 was 4.81 % and in The Consumer Price Index 4.20% what impact has this had on Council Expenditure and how does our projected expenditure in 2012 /2013 compare with say 2007/2008?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

The Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2012/13 to 2014/15 assumed a general inflation rate of 4.0% for 2012/13 and this was also used in the 2012/13 Budget. The General Fund budget for 2012/13 has Total Borough Expenditure of £16,932k which is £2,974k lower than the equivalent figure in 2007/08, which represents a saving of 14.9%, without taking the ensuing inflation into account.

5.5 Councillor Gaskell – Council Budget 2012/2013

What reassurance can you offer in respect of the robustness of this budget and the adequacy of the level of reserves, given the difficult economic climate for all Councils around the country?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

Paragraphs 16 to 21 of Part B of the 2012/13 General Fund and HRA Budget Report to Cabinet on 16 February 2012 cover this area and the conclusion is that the budget: “is robust and meets the requirements of the council for its current spending plans ..”.

5.6 Councillor Bradshaw – Rents for Retail Premises

Would the Leader agree that small shops, post offices and pharmacies are the life blood of our communities and particularly important in outlying areas of relative deprivation where bus fares to the town centre are beyond many family budgets? Rents have increased three fold over the years, with no rejuvenation of the area. Would he ask CNH to look at rents and services provided to such shops, and surrounds in their portfolio in Loughborough, in particular Ashby Ward i.e. Sharpley Road and Wordsworth Road shopping area and let us know what can be done?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

I do agree that a good mix of local shops is important for communities. As regards rent increases we can only control those that we set ourselves, this being the Council's responsibility rather than CNH's, and, whilst these will rise in 2012/13, this is the first increase since 2009. Inflation since April 2009 to the end of January 2012 has been 12.5% and the increase from 1 April 2012 will be in line with inflation as at September 2011. This is a fair result as actual housing rents have increased each year during this period.

5.7 Councillor Grimley – Budget and Council Tax

I understand that this budget has been made available for consultation to all residents and businesses within The Borough. Have you received any criticism regarding the fact that you have not increased Council Tax . What would the Band D and Band B Council Tax be now if the spending reductions achieved since 2007 hadn't taken place?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

The only criticism the Council has received regarding there being no increase in Council Tax has been from the Unison trade union, which stated that the Council would be storing up large increases in future years to cover this. The Council Tax freeze for 2012/13 was included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy and so future savings targets already include the fact that the specific 2012/13 Council Tax Freeze Grant was only for one year

Total Borough Expenditure for 2006/07 was £537k higher than the budget for 2012/13. Using the current council tax base for 2012/13 this would need a £9.73 increase (9.5%) increase in the Band D Council Tax and a £7.56 increase in Band B.

5.8 Councillor Seaton – Weather Conditions

Last week's weather conditions affected working patterns across the Borough. Some were merely delayed due to the weather other jobs were put off until

favourable conditions returned. One workforce that seemed to disappear off our streets was the boroughs street cleaners. Understandably the conditions stopped them following their normal routes and the mechanical road sweepers were not able to operate successfully. However, what happened to this work force? Was it gainfully employed elsewhere or was it just passing the time away in the depot?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

In times of inclement weather and snow all shop areas throughout the Borough are cleaned where possible and all litter bins are emptied. The town centre is covered 8am – 6pm regardless. Street Cleaners who are unable to carry out their normal duties are redeployed to other duties. These duties may involve helping collection crews where passage is possible, gritting in the town centre and cleaning vehicles or housekeeping duties around the depot. It is only as a last resort when all other avenues for working have been exhausted that the workforce would be sent home.

5.9 Councillor Miah – Consultants

Can the Leader disclose how much was spent on all consultants last financial year and how much has already been spent this financial year and what the projected final total of spend on outside consultants will be this year?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

Consultancy costs in the General Fund and HRA revenue accounts for 2010/11 were £326k. For the current 2011/12 year the spend so far is £200k with commitments of £127k so the outturn is expected to be £327k.

5.10 Councillor Stork – Housing Asset Management Software

Can the Leader or his Deputy appraise Council as to the current situation in regards to the purchase of the housing asset management software?

The Leader, or his nominee, will respond:

The need for increased functionality within the Council's Housing Management IT systems relating to asset management was identified over the summer last year as part of the early work to develop the Housing Revenue Account Business plan to respond to the government's self-financing regime.

To ensure that officers were in a position to progress acquisition when a suitable solution was identified an amendment to the annual procurement plan was submitted in September last year and financial resources were identified to procure the necessary software to enhance our asset management capability.

A period of soft market testing has since been carried out in collaboration with officers from CNH during which time a number of demonstrations have been held with all of the software suppliers in this specialist field.

The Council already has an established Housing Management system in place and there are other key financial management systems that interface with it so one of the key factors determining the eventual choice of appropriate asset management software will be the ability of that software to interface fully with the existing system.

Not surprisingly, to maintain a competitive position in this emerging and developing market our current system provider has been working hard to enhance functionality in its asset management capabilities recently and therefore we are currently fully appraising the existing system to identify whether it can meet all of our requirements now, or in the very near future.

If the solution can be delivered by our existing provider this will be a significantly more cost effective outcome.

PROCEDURE FOR QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Council Procedure Rule 5 applies to questions, which Councillors have given notice that they wish to ask. This rule enables a Councillor who has given the required notice to ask a question of the Leader or the Chair of a committee a question and ask a supplementary question and/or make a statement.