

Written Responses from the Leader of the Council to Questions raised at the Council Meeting held on Wednesday 12th September 2012.

Question from Cllr John Taylor to Cllr Mike Stubbs

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm the current balance on the Usable Capital Reserve account?

Usable Capital Reserves account is £773k and is forecast to stand at £1million at the end of the financial year.

(Supplementary Question)

Is this enough to meet the needs of the Council and what is the position with the money held within the Icelandic Bank?

The plans inherited by this administration are insufficient to deal with the known capital expenditure. The cabinet will be meeting with members of the EMT to assess which projected can be value engineered to reduce costs and what expenditure can be postponed until a more sustainable source of funding is available.

Cllr Mark Olszewski to Cllr. Tony Kearon

Can the Portfolio Holder for Safer Communities confirm the current level of spending allocated for Disabled Facilities Grants and what changes in funding has taken place over the last three years?

The Borough has an ageing population, with a significant subset of residents developing significant mobility restrictions in later life. This is reflected in year on year increases in applications for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), which fund necessary changes to the homes of disabled residents to facilitate ease of access.

DFGs are funded partly by borough council funds and partly by funds from central government. The increase in the number of residents qualifying for DFGs resulted in increases in the DFG, which peaked at £830,000 in 2010/11.

Despite continued increases in DFG applications and in the number of disabled residents in the borough, in 2011/12 the DFG budget was reduced to £760,000. This reduction was entirely a result of a reduction in the contribution made to the DFG by the borough council. This sum was not sufficient to cover DFG applications made during 2011/12, and the DFG budget for 2011/12 was fully committed by November 2011. Any applications made after that point were placed on a waiting list.

In January 2012, central government gave the borough council an extra £67,000 to cover DFG applications in the borough. The administration of the borough council at that point decided to treat this additional funding as

replacement funding, and withdrew £67,000 of borough council funds from the DFG budget. This meant that despite the extra £67,000 of government funding, no extra funds were available to help reduce the number of outstanding applications on the waiting list.

Despite the evidence that £760,000 was not a sufficient sum to cover the number of DFG applications submitted over a 12 month period, and despite the existence of the waiting list of applications from 2011/12, the borough council cabinet set a DFG budget for 2012/13 of £760,000.

In May 2012, the incoming administration inherited a DFG budget of £760,000 and a waiting list of DFG applications held over from 2011/12.

The new administration had to use funds from the 2012/13 DFG budget to clear up the waiting list from the previous year before it could begin to process claims for the current year.

This waiting list (DFG applications from 2011/12 that had still not been processed in May 2012) totalled £677,000. Once this waiting list had been cleared up, this left the current administration with a remaining DFG budget of £83,000 to fund DFG applications for 2012/13 (the equivalent of 10% of the funds which were available for DFGs in 2010/11).

It is fair to say that this will not be enough to fund DFG applications made by disabled residents in the borough during the current year.

(Supplementary Question)

What impact has this had on the Council's abilities to meet its statutory requirements for Disabled Facilities Grant?

750K is not enough and therefore £83k will certainly not be enough. We have a moral and legal obligation to deal with this problem and any inaction by the Council can be challenged by the ombudsman.

Cllr Mick Clarke to Cllr Mike Stubbs

To ask the Portfolio Holder for Finance, what the budget deficit was in the financial year 2011/12 and what were the main causes of this shortfall?

There was a £163,000 deficit on the 2011/12 budget which was caused by a decrease in revenue from car park, planning fees etc. This was a deficit on top of the £300,000 already included within the budget as cushion to any shortfall in revenue income.

(Supplementary Question)

What provision, from sustainable sources, has been made within the 2011/12 budget to accommodate these shortfalls?

There is none. The budget included unrealistic figures for income increases and raided the council's reserves to ensure a budget was seen to match

expenditure. The same figures have been included in the 2012/13 budget and there is no reason to presume that these revenue streams will prove to be any better in this year than last. The cabinet is undertaking a line-by-line review of the budget and we will be bringing forward proposals which have sustainable income sources to meet future expenditure.

Cllr. Hilda Johnson to Cllr. Gareth Snell

With the Council's new commitment to consultation, can the Portfolio Holder explain to the Council what provisions have been made to ensure this council is a listening Council, taking on board the concerns of local people?

The new administration has committed to being an open, honest and transparent organisation that listens to the views of the public. The Cabinet will be hosting meetings in communities providing residents with the opportunity to raise matters directly. The Cabinet will also be working with members of the Comms team to ensure we are doing all we can to engage with resident in a meaningful manner.

Written responses to other questions (These are not subject to a supplementary question).

Response from **Cllr. Snell** to **Cllr Howells** regarding monitoring of the Council's contribution to the Town Centre Partnership is effective.

The process for the recruitment for the Town Centre Manager is currently underway. When the successful candidate is appointed, the Newcastle Town Centre Partnership will provide targets and decide on KPIs against which the role will be judged. I will ensure that these are reported to the relevant Scrutiny Committee of the Council to ensure that oversight is applied and the Council can ensure our concerns are voice at Partnership meetings through the seat held by the Portfolio Holder.

Response from Cllr Snell to Cllr Loades regarding the role of Chief Executive Officer for the Town Centre Partnership CIC.

There will be no Chief Executive as such but the Company Directors will appoint a Chair of Directors. It is currently intended that this will be Mr Mitchell of T.C. Cornwell Ltd., 15 High Street, Newcastle under Lyme. The Council, through its nominee Director, has a vote in that process. With regards to funding, it is proposed that this be a grant.

Response from Cllr Snell to Cllr Cornes regarding the Aspire Housing's 'Handyperson Scheme' and its comparison with the Council's proposal.

Aspire Housing offer a Handyperson Scheme for their tenants. It is available to any tenant. The tenant pays for and provides the materials and the handyperson then fits them for free. Tenants can access the scheme through their neighbourhood officer. It is still intended that the contribution to the

separate Revival Handyperson scheme would allow Borough funds to be targeted to local older and vulnerable people.

Response from Cllr. Snell to Cllr. Howells after Cllr Howells asked “Are you unhappy with J2?”

No. Although the Cabinet are working on finding ways to cover the shortfall caused by the insufficient cleaning contract arrangements.

Response from Cllr. Snell to Cllr. Howells regarding the additional costs of holding a Cabinet meeting in Kidsgrove.

The meeting venue of the September Cabinet was provided free of charge by Kidsgrove Town Council. I would like to thank the Town Council for this act of generosity. The only costs which would have occurred as a result of the change of venue will be additional mileage claimed by those officers attending the meeting in Kidsgrove which is estimated to be approximately £50. However, to minimise this impact, Cabinet ensured that only those officers whose attendance was vital were requested to attend.