

## **COUNTY COUNCIL – 5 JULY 2017**

**ITEM 6 ON THE AGENDA – QUESTIONS** to be put to the Business Chair, a member of the Cabinet or the Chair of any Committee or Sub-Committee

### **Question 1 from Councillor G. Hill to Councillor J. Riddle**

Does the new administration agree that the fire service is an essential front line service and that recent tragic events have demonstrated, if any reminder was needed, the value of our firefighters and the gratitude we owe them ?

Do you also agree that the previous administration failed to demonstrate this and potentially compromised public safety by closing fire stations and slashing funding ?

If so, what steps will be taken to rectify this ?

### **Response**

This administration certainly does agree that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service provides an essential front line service and it is valued by ourselves and our communities not only when it has to respond to emergency incidents or perform rescues but for the prevention and protection work it undertakes to improve the health, welfare and safety of our residents and visitors. The tragic events of Grenfell Tower have shown the high regard and esteem the Fire Service is held in, not only in Northumberland, but across the UK.

I would think all elected members of NCC value the contribution made by NFRS as a crucial front line service of the County Council and would express their gratitude for the sometimes very challenging and dangerous work done by our firefighters. .

### **Question 2 from Councillor G. Hill to Councillor J. Riddle**

Are you aware of the large scale dissatisfaction felt by taxi drivers in Berwick about the service they receive from NCC ?

### **Response**

**I can confirm that the Taxi Testing arrangements for Alnwick and Berwick licensed vehicles have recently changed and owners will be required to present all licensed vehicles to the Council's fleet maintenance depot at Lionheart Industrial Estate in Alnwick which is our approved testing station. The Council policy was changed in December 2015 with a long lead in period prior to the implementation of the new arrangements for Alnwick and Berwick. All other areas have had similar requirements since December 2015.**

The changes were introduced in the interests of public safety as the staff at the Council's depots can be authorised to prohibit an unsafe vehicle and prevent its further use as a taxi. Examiners at Private MOT testing stations cannot be so authorised.

The policy was fully consulted on prior to the introduction and the decision was taken by the Licensing Regulatory Committee. Consultations event were arranged throughout the county including Berwick. However most of the consultation events within Berwick were cancelled due to lack of interest. In 2015 the Council also introduced 3 year duration licences for taxi drivers. This allowed drivers to reduce both the cost and administration required to remain licensed.

We have also had to review the arrangements for personal appointments at Berwick due to recent unforeseen staffing issues. The drivers can still hand in items at the Information Point at Berwick to be forwarded to the Licensing office. Arrangements are being made for appointments within Alnwick and this will be continually monitored and amended where staffing levels allow and there is sufficient need.

### **Question 3 from Councillor T. Clark to the Leader**

I am sure the Leader has read the minutes of Capital Works Cabinet Advisory Group from April where officers deemed James Calvert Spence College to be the next priority School in need of refurbishment or rebuild. I am sure he also read that the Cabinet Advisory Group recommended the approval of the investment from the already allocated Schools Capital Fund.

Can the Leader confirm whether the financial commitments made to James Calvert Spence College by the former Administration which were endorsed by the Officers and the Capital Works Advisory Group will be honoured, and that much-needed investment for the education of children in Amble and surrounding areas will be delivered?

**Response:**

**This Administration is absolutely committed to ensuring that much needed investment into schools is provided. However, given the significant capital pressure, all school developments are being reviewed**

### **Question 4 from Councillor B. Gallacher to the Leader**

The previous administration signed a joint letter on behalf of this Council and families across Northumberland to the Prime Minister highlighting the Conservative

Government's proposed changes to schools funding formula arrangements that could see Northumberland £16million worse off.

Can he explain what response has been received to date?

### **Response**

**The general election and a period of purdah delayed the response to this national schools funding consultation. However the Queen's speech did re-iterate the government's commitment to ensure fairer funding for schools. We would expect that a response will be provided to all Local Authorities and schools in the autumn.**

**"We share the government's desire for every child to attend a good or outstanding school. We must ensure that the urgent problems facing the school system are not overlooked by regional bodies, namely bringing coherence across a rapidly changing education system.**

**Addressing the current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention is a key priority for us.**

**Reform of technical education is very welcome. It is important that vocational qualifications are valued as highly as academic ones. These equip young people with the skills that our regional economy needs. Putting vocational and academic qualifications on the same level is good for both our young people and our businesses.**

### **Question 5 from Councillor I. Swithenbank to Councillor G. Sanderson**

Parish and Town Councils are concerned at his plans to change the service delivery areas, especially for those who have enhanced services and have built up relationships with those Council Workers for many years. This is valued income to the County Council that also benefits the environment for communities across Northumberland.

What measures will he put in place to ensure a smooth transition between teams and when will information be circulated to those Town and Parish Councils along with County Councillors about the changes?

### **Response**

**The County Council acknowledges and values the good working relationships that have built up over the years between Town and Parish Councils and the staff who are responsible for delivering services in their local area. It is our**

**intention to strengthen these relationships as part of the new Local Area Council arrangements. In order to do this it will be necessary to make some changes to our existing operational areas, particularly within Neighbourhood Services and Highways Delivery, so that our operational boundaries for service delivery are better aligned with the new Local Area Council boundaries. This is necessary to ensure that individual managers have clear responsibility and accountability for the staff and resources used to deliver these key front line services within the new Local Area Council boundaries.**

**We are currently finalising the operational changes that need to be put in place within Neighbourhood Services and Highways Delivery to enable the delivery arrangements for these service areas to align with the new Local Area Council boundaries. We aim to implement the new arrangements from Monday 31st July 2017 and prior to this will be amending our 'Who's Who' guide for Local Services, which is available on the Council's web page, as well as writing to all County Councillors and Town and Parish Councils to advise them who their key contacts are for Neighbourhood Services and Highways Delivery within their local area.**

**For those Town and Parish Councils that have a service enhancement partnership or service level agreement in place with the Council, where there is a change in management / staffing responsibilities we will ensure that there is a smooth handover of information between staff and that formal introductions of key personnel and details of any staffing changes are shared through the appropriate 'partnership board/committee' governance arrangements.**

**It should be noted that whilst there will be some changes to the geographic areas of responsibility for Local Services staff, it is envisaged that the key contacts will remain unchanged for the majority of Town and Parish Councils, and I can also confirm the Council remains fully committed to the existing partnership working / service level agreements it has in place and will continue to work hard to ensure the service standards are maintained and where possible improved.**

**Question 6 from Councillor B. Pidcock to the Leader**

Has the current Administration any plans for a Holocaust Memorial Day event, following the success of the Labour Group over the past 4 years?

### **Response**

**Yes, we intend to have a similar event this year. The Director of Children's Services and David Cookson, Commissioner for Secondary Education, have been asked to co-ordinate the event with Councillor Veronica Jones the Equality and Diversity Champion and we would welcome Cllr Pidcock's support and input.**

### **Question 7 from Councillor B. Pidcock to Councillor J. Riddle**

I am sure the new administration believes that good council housing is important as the previous administration did. The previous administration returned Homes for Northumberland to the Council so members could be more involved in housing and be taking issues up for their residents, ensure good housing provision was available in Northumberland and members had some part in shaping the future along with important tenant's voices.

To avoid the democratic process being eroded can the cabinet member confirm that Homes for Northumberland will be included in Council Scrutiny processes and they will make members aware of any policy reviews in good time so meaningful input can be given?

### **Response**

**The council remains committed to ensuring all of its social housing stock meets the decent homes standard and there is a significant rolling capital investment programme to ensure that this is the case.**

**Housing Services are included within the Terms of Reference for the Communities and Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the committee is in the process of formulating its work programme for the year. Notwithstanding, I can confirm that In accordance with the Council's procedural arrangements, any policy issues / key decisions relating to housing services would go through pre-scrutiny prior to being considered by Cabinet.**

**I would also wish to take the opportunity to confirm that we will continue to work closely with and listen to the views of our tenants as part of the normal management arrangements for the service.**

### **Supplementary Information - Tenant Voice**

***The council and myself place great importance on direct engagement with our tenants and ensuring that they have the ability to raise concerns both with officers and councillors. To that end, the Head of Housing attends the Tenant Forum bi-monthly meetings, which we will continue to use as a consultative body, and I have agreed with the Forum that if there are any matters of concern that I will meet with them as and when appropriate to discuss those issues and agree how best they be resolved. This may include myself taking action or the matter being referred to the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.***

### **Question 8 from Councillor K. Nisbet to Councillor G. Sanderson**

It was interesting to hear at the Morpeth Area Council that the Leaders patch was receiving weed spraying the following Monday, however, other areas are yet to see a weed sprayer.

Do the Conservative plans for weed spraying include areas outside the seats held by the administration as it did previously or has the budget for the other areas been removed?

### **Response**

**The County Council currently engages private contractors to undertake the first application of weed sprays on pavements, areas of hardstandings etc in April/May each year. This is supplemented by our own teams of staff who weed spray around obstacles using quad bikes and knapsacks. In accordance with the legislation governing the use of herbicides, the Council is limited to using contact herbicides which have no residual weed killing power and need to be absorbed by the vegetation in order to be effective. These types of herbicide are therefore less effective as they require the weed growth to be present before it can be treated, can be easily washed off foliage if it rains shortly after being applied, and do not prevent germination/growth of new weeds due to the lack of any residual effect.**

**I can assure members that the Council's weed spraying contractors have been out across the whole county and have completed the application of herbicides**

**in accordance with the contractual arrangements that were put in place prior to the recent local elections. In those areas where the treatment has not resulted in die-back, due to weather conditions etc, then the contractor is required to revisit and re-spray the affected areas - this is normal practice. As part of the grounds maintenance duties, our own suitably certified staff are also continuing to react to areas where weed growth is evident by undertaking spot spraying using quad bikes and knapsack applicators throughout the growing season.**

**The budgets for weed treatment have not been reduced by the new administration and the existing arrangements at the start of the year have been delivered as normal. Further investment is being made in-year to undertake additional weed treatments across the county later in the summer at a cost of circa £30,000. This is a service area that we will be reviewing during 2017 as part of the wider budget setting process for the coming years, as we are not satisfied that the current arrangements are effective and deliver an acceptable standard of service and will need to consider how we can make improvements to this service within the wider context of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan.**