

Questions with Notice under Standing Order No. 6 – Full Council, 7 July 2022

<p>QUESTION 1: Councillor Philip Morton to Executive Member for Waste, Environmental Health, Licensing and Sustainability:</p> <p>When will a review of performance against the Eunomia report guidelines for achieving net zero be made available with updated carbon emissions data ?</p>
<p>RESPONSE:</p> <p>A report is scheduled on the Council’s forward plan for Cabinet in November where both the carbon footprints for 2020-21 and 2021-22 to be published. Going forward these will be published annually in October.</p>
<p>QUESTION 2: Councillor Philip Morton to the Leader:</p> <p>Recent changes to Building Regulations, effective from 15th June, are a positive move in tackling climate change and I fully support their introduction. Can the leader confirm resources are in place to ensure the Building Regulations are complied with ?</p>
<p>RESPONSE:</p> <p>The changes to building regulations provide a step forward in helping to tackle climate change in line with the Councils objectives. They will be considered through the building regulation application process, whether that is by the Council in its role as a Local Building Control Authority or by an approved Inspector. There are, therefore, sufficient resources in place as it is not anticipated that additional applications will be generated by the changes.</p>
<p>QUESTION 3: Councillor Tim Birt to the Executive Member for Property, Projects & Procurement:</p> <p>COMMERCIAL PROPERTY DEBT As you confirmed “there is no specific mechanism to keep all members informed” about the following important financial indicator I request an update with our current position: (a) Within our commercial property portfolio, what is the value of outstanding debt owed to the Council 90 days after the original settlement date? (b) Within our commercial property portfolio, what is the value of debt written off in the current tax year (commencing 6-April-2022) to date?</p>
<p>RESPONSE:</p> <p>(a) - £317,312.98 I have spoken to the Chairman of the Scrutiny Commission who believes, like me, that this information should best be provided as part of the KPIs of the Council moving forward.</p> <p>(b) - Nil</p>

QUESTION 4:**Councillor Tim Birt to the Executive Member for Economic Development & Growth:****HATCH REPORT**

In March 2021 the “*Future Breckland: Thriving People & Places*” was announced, the press release stated:

“With a specific focus on Breckland's five market towns, Dereham, Thetford, Attleborough, Watton and Swaffham, the programme will focus on identifying significant projects that can be delivered in our towns for the benefit of the District as a whole. This work should put Breckland in pole-position to leverage new external funding ...”

- (a) What was the total value paid to ‘economic specialists’ *Hatch* for this project?
- (b) What was the total value paid to ‘urbanists’ *We Made That* for this project?
- (c) What is the value of the ‘new external funding’ received to date as a direct result of this project?
- (d) How much ‘new external funding’ does the Council expect to receive over the three years as a direct result of this project?
- (e) How will we report the return on investment for this project?

RESPONSE:

Following the Council’s decision to support the project – initially known as ‘Town Delivery Plans – in October 2019, I am pleased that we have been able to bring forward one of the biggest pieces of engagement and planning in the District’s history. This should see us well prepared to join resources, secure funding, and help create thriving places across Breckland. To answer your specific questions:

- a. The total value paid to *Hatch* for this project is £232,845
- b. The total value paid to *We Made That* is £0. *We Made That* have worked as part of the consortia of experts led by *Hatch*.
- c. The value of new external funding received as a direct result of this work to date is estimated at £178k.
- d. It should be noted that the focus of the project is not limited to just securing public sector investment and is intended to help facilitate private sector investment, coordinate activity and is not limited to projects which require significant capital. That said, we expect a minimum ROI of 5:1. Beyond this, the work is particularly focussed around potential high-impact investments which by their nature are difficult to guarantee. Over that same period we expect the project to enable high-quality bids far in excess of the 5:1 figure. Whilst, given the intensely competitive nature of funding, and the relative prioritisation of Breckland in the Government’s Levelling Up Agenda, we cannot guarantee success in this regard we are confident this positions Breckland in the strongest position possible with a high-quality evidence base and reasoned and considered interventions based around all of our market towns.
- e. In its forming stage ROI is being tracked through the Council’s existing assurance framework, including oversight by the Thriving Places Board. For implementation a paper is being prepared for the Council to consider in the Autumn to support adoption of the finalised plans, evidence base and district wide prospectus. This will include recommendations of wider reporting and assurance, including the role of a multidisciplinary Board, and integration with wider Council functions including O&S and other key member groups.

QUESTION 5:

Councillor Tim Birt to the Executive Member for Health & Communities:

COST OF LIVING CRISIS

Considering that the Bank of England Governor has warned inflation will persist longer in the UK and hints at further interest rate rises; and with a further rise in the energy price cap due in the autumn; and Breckland's large rural population relying on oil for heating, which is not price capped:

- (a) What measures are we taking to identify those at risk of being unable to pay for basic necessities such as food or energy or housing costs this coming autumn?
- (b) What funding have we set aside to assist those in need?
- (c) What external funding will we be able to acquire?
- (d) Is the available funding adequate to mitigate the risk?

RESPONSE:

[\(a\) What measures are we taking to identify those at risk of being unable to pay for basic necessities such as food or energy or housing costs this coming autumn?](#)

Where we have consent to do so, we hold the data of all residents who we have supported either directly or indirectly to allow us to proactively reach out where we believe they may be at risk of needing further support.

The Council allocates over £50,000 per annum to commission Citizens Advice services across the District, these services deliver important support to residents who may be affected by increasing cost of living costs.

Breckland Council facilitates a multi-agency system of support via our Early Help Collaboration meetings. This forum brings together up to 40 statutory and voluntary organisations to work collaboratively to prevent issues from reaching crisis point, this includes addressing financial matters such as unexpected costs or longer term solutions such as debt advice and budget management.

The organisations who attend Collaboration, including Council services such as our Housing teams and Community Connectors, are at the heart of identifying residents in need and we provide the mechanism to seek solutions through our network of support.

Furthermore, the housing team worked with the 6 other district councils and partners to draft a press release that led to an article being shared in the EDP, encouraging residents to contact councils and other organisations as early as possible for assistance: <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/norfolk-homeless-prevention-services-seeing-rise-enquiries-crisis-9098722>

(b) What funding have we set aside to assist those in need?

Direct solutions to address the financial challenges our residents face, include:

Early Intervention Fund – a Breckland fund totalling just over £30,000 available to partners and Members to apply to on behalf of residents they are working with who are in need of financial assistance to avoid them reaching crisis. Claims are reviewed and assessed by Early Help Collaboration partners and the outcome is shared with the referrer and where applicable, the resident directly. Details of the criteria for this fund are available on Member pages.

Nourishing Norfolk – Breckland Council has contributed funding to both Breckland Mobile Food Store and The Burrell Supermarket, both of which provide healthy and nutritious food at a reduced price, as well as wider support by connecting to our Early Help Collaboration network for additional needs. The Nourishing Norfolk Network is delivered by Norfolk Community Foundation and is helping to combat

food insecurity to ensure that no-one goes hungry. Their ongoing efforts are likely to see more 'food hubs' opening in Breckland in the near future and we are committed to continue to support these ventures.

Household Support Fund (2) – The 2nd round of Household Support Fund is available to residents who need financial support to access food, energy and water, and wider essentials such as new appliances to enable them to cook food. The funding must be apportioned evenly to pension aged residents, families with children, and other households in need such as those not in receipt of welfare benefits but in need of assistance. Household Support Funding is issued to upper tier Councils and it is for them to agree how they distribute to district councils. It should be spent by 30th September 2022.

This time around, the allocation to Breckland Council is to provide support to pension age residents only however, we can also apply to a small central emergency fund for housing costs such as essential repairs to improve energy efficiency.

The breakdown of Breckland funds is:

- £114,000 Household Support Fund for pension age residents
- £33,616 central pot for emergency housing costs

The first round of Household Support Fund saw Breckland Council issue over £180,000 to almost 700 families between December 2021 and March 2022. In addition, between March 2020 and December 2021, we issued over £45,000 of our own hardship fund to those financially impacted by covid-19.

The government has recently announced a further allocation of Household Support Funding from October 2022. We are awaiting further guidance on how this should be apportioned but will use the learnings from the previous two rounds of distributing funds to ensure it goes to those most in need.

Discretionary Housing Payments – available for households who are claiming the relevant housing-related benefits to help top up the rent shortfall or mitigate some arrears due to the benefit not meeting the full costs, for a short period to help through a crisis time.

(c) What external funding will we be able to acquire?

Additional Household Support Fund initiatives in place for residents experiencing financial hardship include:

Norfolk Assistance Scheme

The Norfolk Assistance Scheme (NAS) helps people who are in financial hardship and cannot pay their living costs, they can offer financial assistance with living costs to:

- Pay for petrol or your transport costs to enable you to get to work
- Give you a food voucher to spend at a supermarket
- Give you a voucher to buy school clothes from a uniform supplier
- Make a gas or electricity meter pre-payment via Paypoint if you have run out
- Help with moving and storage costs if you have to set up a new home
- Provide an immediate small cash payment for daily expenses in an emergency

Cost of Living Vouchers

- Support payment available to families eligible for Free School Meals
- Payment awarded as Eden red vouchers.
- This is managed directly through Schools

Anglian Water

- Supporting customers to clear their water debt arrears and signpost to wider support

- Targeting Norfolk residents over the age of 65 and on an Anglian Water social tariff
- This is managed directly by Anglian Water

VCSE Offer managed by Norfolk Community Foundation

- Organisations can apply for funding to distribute up to £250 per household where there is an older person/s, individuals with disabilities and their carers
- The £250 payment can be claimed once per household, and there is no minimum or maximum number of people per household.
- This funding complements the existing support provided through the organisation's services
- This should include signposting and provision of information to those who are particularly vulnerable to the increasing cost of living.
- Successful applications will also receive an additional 10% of the total applied for to assist with the administration and distribution costs associated with delivering the funding
- This will be automatically applied to each grant payment and does not need to be applied for separately – NCF are funding this via their wider fundraising reserves.

Additionally, the Government Cost of Living Support is outlined as follows:

- Energy Bills Support Scheme doubled to a one-off £400
- £650 one-off Cost of Living Payment for those on means tested benefits
- One-off £300 Pensioner Cost of Living Payment
- £150 Disability Cost of Living Payment

Full guidance on the conditions surrounding each of these payments can be found on the government website, we would be happy to share details if required.

This is in addition to the Council tax rebate issued in April, that provided a payment of £150 to households living in council tax bands A – D. The total number of residents paid directly into their bank accounts between the end of April and mid-June was 45935, that's a total of £6.8m in support to help our residents with rising cost of living. In June, over 7500 residents received a credit to their Council Tax account, totalling another £1.1m.

Furthermore, Breckland Council has an additional £240,900 to allocate through their own Council Tax rebate discretionary scheme. Although the scheme runs to the end of November ARP aim to make the majority of awards by the end of August. This additional funding will provide financial support to vulnerable households and those on low incomes in band E-H properties. It will also provide additional top up support to those in band A-D properties on low incomes.

(d) Is the available funding adequate to mitigate the risk?

Whilst we cannot guarantee that available funding will mitigate the risk, we do believe we have a strong system of support in place to work with residents to overcome issues that are either as a result of financial hardship, or to prevent hardship from worsening.

QUESTION 6:

Councillor Tim Birt to the Executive Member for Property, Projects and Procurement:

CAR PARK SURVEY

Some Cabinet members have assigned a pejorative label to a group of users of Queen's Square Car Park in Attleborough despite them abiding by all rules at the time. Breckland Council has

subsequently trialled a time limit and **launched a survey** to seek feedback on the car park:

(a) Do the statements previously made and widely reported in newspaper introduce bias or predetermined the outcome of the survey?

(b) Is there a risk that those so labelled will not respond to the survey either because they feel their views are already disregarded or for fear of retribution?

(c) How will the Council ensure it receives full representation from all previous users of the car park, including those who wish to use park and use public transport to access Norwich?

(d) How will the Council evaluate any climate impact of the new car park time limit?

RESPONSE:

- a) No. Our approach is to provide a feedback portal rather than a survey which enables us to capture the full scope of opinions without the risk of conscious or unconscious bias.
- b) No. We have engaged with users of the car park in a number of different ways to actively encourage them to use the portal, and have already received a number of responses with a range of different opinions.
- c) Whilst we cannot obtain information from every previous user of the car park, we have ensured through a high level of engagement that regular users have been signposted to the portal. That includes those who commute out of town and is reflected in the feedback received so far.
- d) The parking trial is a response to a specific request, and resulting feedback is not designed to evaluate a climate impact: the portal is focused on obtaining comments from users in relation to the ambition of the trial, which is to encourage a churn of vehicles within the Queen's Square car park allowing our businesses in the town, and shoppers to the town, to benefit.

QUESTION 7:

Councillor Tim Birt to the Executive Member for Finance, Revenue and Benefits:

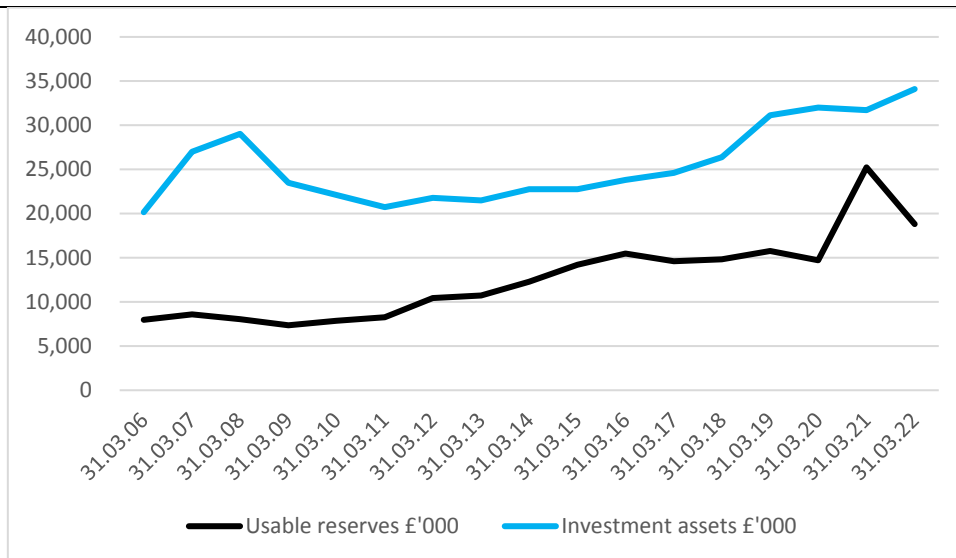
CAPITAL INVESTMENT vs RESERVES

This council has committed large amounts of expenditure on different things at different times. A common way of getting support for this expenditure is to call it an investment. A prudent business would monitor the return-on-investment and ensure the revenue extracted did not deplete capital value. In a well operated system revenue could then be used to support Council services and build a reserve for future capital investment.

- (a) Please would you show a graph of how the level of reserves have changed alongside the total value of the Council's capital investment assets for the last 20 years?
- (b) What is the expectation that the Council will need to borrow money in the next couple of years?

RESPONSE:

- (a) The graph below shows the balances held in 'Usable Reserves' (excluding the General Fund) alongside the accounting valuations of assets categorised as 'Investment Assets' under the CIPFA Accounting Code at 31st March each year.



It should be noted that under the CIPFA Accounting Code Investment Assets does not include any assets categorised as finance leases.

- (b) The Annual Treasury Management report on this Council agenda shows that Breckland currently has a small borrowing requirement, but this is being managed through internal borrowing from balances whilst interest rate returns remain low. Any future borrowing needs will be determined by the budget, medium term financial plan and capital programme over the coming years.