

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2022
QUESTIONS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

WRITTEN RESPONSES PROVIDED AFTER THE MEETING AS THE MEMBER HAD SUBMITTED THEIR APOLOGIES FOR THE MEETING OR THE TIME LIMIT OF 60 MINUTES FOR QUESTIONS WAS REACHED

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Helen-Ann Smith

What do you think is the biggest barrier to residents using buses in Nottinghamshire?

Response from Councillor Neil Clarke MBE, Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

In practice, I can base my opinion on evidence rather than a gut feeling. We are fortunate to have our own Transport & Planning Operations team who - as well as saving bus routes like the 141 - collect a wide range of feedback and data on incentives for bus use, and barriers to bus use, across Nottinghamshire. Likewise, a lot of work has taken place at national level to establish the reasons people do or do not use buses, all of which is used to inform future policy.

Mr Chairman, this is stating the obvious really, but a big barrier to residents using buses is if the bus doesn't turn up!

There are various challenges around service delivery, which has been an issue for some of our local commercial operators in recent months. Along with transport officers, I met with directors of local bus operators recently and discussed a range of issues including challenges they face around driver shortages. I was pleased to learn of the extensive recruitment and training work that is ongoing. Through our enhanced partnership arrangements with the operators, we will be monitoring this closely. I am pleased too that the Place Select Committee will be considering transport issues from early October, which demonstrates the value of our new scrutiny function and will offer members further opportunities to discuss this important topic.

We should recognise, Mr Chairman, that the biggest barrier to bus use may change according to when you ask the question. The World Health Organisation announced last week that we are now officially approaching the end of the Covid pandemic, but if you had asked this question 18 months to two years ago then the answer would have been obvious. Our lives were heavily affected by lockdowns and social distancing, and even when the lockdowns eased and it became possible for people other than key workers to resume using buses and other forms of public transport, fear of infection still deterred some people from resuming their previous travelling habits, especially older and more vulnerable individuals.

To a certain degree, the fallout from the Covid pandemic remains a factor affecting bus services. Passenger numbers on a considerable number of routes have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and while the changes to public behaviour since Covid should not be passed off as the sole reason for this decline, it would be equally naive not to see it as a noteworthy factor.

The desire to remove barriers to bus use has formed a major part of the Government's approach to the National Bus Strategy and is embedded in our own Bus Service Improvement Plans, for which we have received an indicative funding allocation of £30 million over the next three years. Let me give you three examples of our existing investment and future plans:

1. First, the Council currently invests £4.1 million to support bus services that are not commercially viable, and we are also providing further temporary support through to April 2023 to help the bus sector recover from the pandemic. Our ambitious plan for Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) monies will drive further investment in the bus network over the next 3 years, which will be informed by the bus network review which I've asked Officers to undertake. This will prioritise future investment to help people access employment, training, health and leisure opportunities.
2. Secondly, we consistently invest in our bus infrastructure to improve bus service reliability and punctuality - one of the top priorities for passengers. In fact, we're seeking additional funding as part of our BSIP proposals to invest in bus priority and bus infrastructure to encourage people to use the buses.
3. And third, we're looking to use BSIP monies to improve ticketing options for passengers to widen travel opportunities and encourage people to use the buses. This includes ambitious plans for further integrated ticketing and young people's travel schemes.

I am keen that everyone takes the opportunity to encourage residents to leave their cars at home, cut carbon emissions, save the environment and use their local buses wherever possible. This will help ensure these vital services are sustained.

Opinion and evidence may vary on the biggest barriers to bus use according to when the question is asked and how the data is interpreted, but what is certain is that the Government and this local authority are working hard to remove those barriers, and we will continue to do so.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Communities from Councillor Mike Pringle

How much of the £5.6 million of Government funded Household Support Fund (Phase 2) money has been spent to date?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Cabinet Member for Communities

Phase Two of the Household Support Fund has entered its final 10 days, and I am pleased to say we are currently on course to spend the entirety of the Fund.

There has been a recent 'push' to encourage our staff and partners to make their final referrals and thereby ensure that HSF support is provided to those in need before 30th September. This phase of the Fund has seen the families of around 30,000 children eligible for Free School Meals receive funding support, with food and energy support currently being distributed to around 14,000 eligible pensioners. Valuable support to other households in need is also currently being distributed.

Phase Three of the fund is currently being developed so that it can be launched in the coming weeks. We are awaiting confirmation on the amount to be awarded to the Council, and the requirements for this phase of the scheme, but we will of course be communicating these details as soon as we are able.

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Kate Foale

Would the Leader agree with me that the Government's model for financing Local Government services at current levels is unsustainable?

Response from Councillor Ben Bradley MP, Leader of the Council

Before Covid-19 there were but few instances of local authorities declaring a Section 114 notice, which is the classic signal of the financial dangers faced by that council. Through Covid-19 there was a stark rise in the number of Section 114 notices and there are a myriad of reasons why each council ended up with such a financial situation. I can understand from a Government's viewpoint that a few councils declaring such issues could be classed as poor governance on their part. And in fact, most have arisen due to poor decision making and ultimately poor governance.

I can understand the new increasing pressures now facing local authorities from:

- Increasing fuel costs
- Increasing energy costs
- Wage inflation
- Increasing costs from suppliers, driven by the above and from potential increases in the National Living Wage
- Increasing demand caused by economic pressures in our communities

But we should also remember that local authorities are still tied to central government purse strings and controls. Government determines if any additional grant will be provided from central taxes, they determine the National Living Wage, they limit the raising of local taxes. Not that I am advocating the latter is lifted as this only adds to the financial burden upon our already financially stretched communities.

I know that Government doesn't want local government to fail. They realise the important services that we provide to the most vulnerable people in our society.

Nor do I believe they will wait for a raft of Section 114 notices to appear to respond.

I conclude by saying that I am an advocate of local government and their importance in supporting and shaping our communities. As to their overall financial sustainability I will leave others to speculate.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Communities from Councillor John 'Maggie' McGrath

As the Council are set to review key bus services, will the Council also consider reinstating financial support for the Helpful Bureau's community transport service, to allow for services previously provided in the community to be reinstated?

Response from Councillor John Cottee, Cabinet Member for Communities

The County Council continues to work with the Helpful Bureau in Stapleford to support all of its aspirations, through offering a range of financial and practical support to help it develop sustainable operating plans for the long term. I recently visited the Bureau with officers, Councillor Doddy, and yourself Councillor McGrath, to hear the aspirations of the Bureau, including Community Transport, and to discuss how we can support and help, within the limits of our financial resources of course.

In this respect, through the heavily over-subscribed Local Communities Fund, Nottinghamshire County Council has awarded just under £29,000 per year, for four years, to support the Bureau's Practical Help Services and Autumn Years Activities – one of our largest individual grants.

We have also recently awarded a further £5,000 for this year for the Bureau to provide weekly day trips for clients, and we are currently considering a further application for £5,000 to provide a transport scheme for South Broxtowe.

I am very happy of course to continue discussions regarding how the support already offered by the Council fits with the overall Community Transport scheme the Bureau wishes to offer, and I am happy that the Council continues to offer very strong financial support for the Bureau's work.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Penny Gowland

What is this Council's position on the introduction of a 'school streets' policy in Nottinghamshire?

Response from Councillor Neil Clarke MBE, Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

I presume that Councillor Gowland is referring to the School Streets Initiative, more information about which can be found on the website: www.schoolstreets.org.uk

The website includes the obvious Frequently Asked Question: 'What are School Streets?', and duly provides the answer:

'A School Street is a road outside a school with a temporary restriction on motorised traffic at school drop-off and pick-up times. The restriction applies to school traffic and through traffic. The result' – the website claims – 'is a safer, healthier and pleasant environment for everyone.'

The website further states:

'School Street schemes offer a proactive solution for school communities to tackle air pollution, poor health and road danger reduction. A School Street scheme will encourage a healthier lifestyle and active travel to school for families and lead to a better environment for everyone.'

Chairman, the direct answer to Councillor Gowland's question is that this Council hasn't adopted a position on 'School Streets' yet. We are aware of 'School Streets' initiatives taking place locally, particularly in Nottingham City and also more recently the trials in Leicestershire, which are possibly more relevant as they are in a County setting similar to our own.

We are in contact with Leicestershire officers concerning the three trials they have introduced outside schools, and we will be liaising with them over the next six months as they monitor the outcomes and potential success of these. Should the Leicestershire trials be successful, Nottinghamshire County Council could consider its own approach to 'school streets' in the future.

This might be precisely the type of policy suggestion that warrants examination through our new scrutiny function, gathering in evidence from elsewhere, but obviously it is for members of the relevant committee, rather than me as an Executive Member, to decide whether and when this might be scheduled into the Work Programme.

Question to the Leader of the Council, from Councillor Jason Zadrozny

Can you explain what benefits residents in Nottinghamshire have received as a result of Arts Council, England funding over the past 5 years?

Response from Councillor Ben Bradley MP, Leader of the Council

Arts Council funding matters normally fall within Councillor Cottee's portfolio, but on this occasion, I'll provide the answer.

I'm pleased to say that the Arts Council has a longstanding track record of supporting cultural services activity in Nottinghamshire. I understand that the Arts Council supports a range of organisations and arts and cultural initiatives and institutions across Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, many of which of course are entirely independent of the County Council and cross local authority boundaries in terms of their public reach.

Closer to home, the County Council's cultural and libraries services partner, Inspire, has worked hard in recent years to secure Arts Council funding for a range of initiatives, and has generated almost £1.7m in financial support from the Arts Council.

Highlights include:

- Support for the Able Orchestra, which has seen severely disabled young people from across the County brought together to create and perform original music and compositions, including a televised performance at the Proms;
- Support for Inspire's annual poetry festival, which brings national poetry figures to Nottinghamshire each autumn to perform at Library venues across the County – with this year's Festival due to start at Southwell Library tomorrow evening;

- National portfolio organisation funding - a package of support worth around £1 million over a number of years recognising Inspire's important role in the cultural life of our county, supporting a range of projects and programmes aimed at improving participation in cultural and arts activities, particularly in those places that would benefit most from additional support;
- Other projects supported by the Arts Council include literacy and reading programmes, art and drawing initiatives, and community theatre programmes.

Of course, it's important that we maintain an appropriately constructive and robust relationship with the Arts Council, so that we can continue to maximise investment in our local cultural life, for all the social, wellbeing and economic benefits that it brings. We also have to offer appropriate scrutiny, in order to ensure that our national funders understand and respect our local circumstances, interests and priorities. I have often been supportive of the Arts Council publicly, as well as also being robust when I have felt that money has been mis-spent or priorities have been skewed. I've met with them on several occasions and will continue to maintain that relationship.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, from Councillor Penny Gowland

Following the establishment of a Climate Change team, when was the report confirming the grading and job title of the team's most senior post received by the Cabinet Member?

Response from Councillor Neil Clarke MBE, Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment

I understand from officers that Councillor Gowland is aware that the post in question is still subject to final confirmation of grade. Once this process is complete, responsibility for finalising the role, and authorising recruitment, rests with officers under the terms of the Council's constitution, rather than myself as Cabinet member.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Asset Management, from Councillor Anne Callaghan

As part of the review of Council assets, does this Council have any plans to reduce the amount of immediate communal and green open spaces which are currently available to Nottinghamshire residents?

Response from Councillor Keith Girling, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Asset Management

The Council has a large, mixed property portfolio that we review to see if individual properties and sites continue to serve Council purposes. These diverse sites range from large former school sites to agricultural sites to small and disparate pieces of land. Where the Council has declared a site surplus to its operational requirements we will consider if disposal to others would provide a better outcome for our residents. These sites are generally, fenced off and secured from unauthorised access, although we are aware of some sites where there is unauthorised access despite the security arrangements we have in place.

Our review of the property portfolio has led to some of these types of sites being identified for development. Where this is the case the sale and any subsequent development would then often include the provision of more formal enhanced public spaces or sports provision to serve the identified needs of the community.

The Council continues to invest in more public open spaces. As an example, Members will be aware of the purchase earlier this year of 100 acres of farmland at Willey Wood Farm for woodland planting which will be accessible to the public. Furthermore, the County Council's Green Spaces holdings comprise over 1,250 hectares managed for wildlife and people, including 5 sites of special scientific interest, 6 local nature reserves, 40 local wildlife sites and 57 km of trails and multi-user routes.

As Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Asset Management, I am very aware of the impact of the loss of green spaces on communities. Please be assured that as part of our consideration of the Council's property portfolio responsibilities, we will give due consideration to any potential loss with mitigation, through provision of enhanced spaces in a new development or ensuring green spaces are protected for the future.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, from Councillor Debbie Darby

Can you define the words "exceptional circumstances" and how they relate to Nottinghamshire County Council's policy on school clothing allowances?

Response from Councillor Tracey Taylor, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

The answer is publicly available on the Nottinghamshire County Council website, so I shall quote it directly:

'School clothing allowances are discretionary and are no longer available to families living within Nottinghamshire except in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances means families who have lost clothes in a fire, a flood, theft, have been made homeless or are fleeing domestic violence. If parents consider their circumstances to meet one of these exceptional cases a request can be made to the Senior Professional Practitioners, Admissions and FSM Service. There is no guarantee that a request will be approved. [Following submission of a request, the team will aim to respond to your enquiry within 10 working days.](#)'

[Anybody with enquiries relating to this is welcome to contact our customer service team on 0300 500 8080 for further assistance.]

Question to the Leader of the Council, from Councillor Errol Henry JP

Black History Month is very important to many residents in Nottinghamshire. Can the Leader outline what plans this Council have in place to mark the month?

Response from Councillor Ben Bradley MP, Leader of the Council

The Council will be recognising Black History Month this October with the theme of “Time for Change - Action Not Words” with a series of articles being published and new content being added to the Council’s intranet.

The Chief Executive has very recently met with the Co-chairs of the Council’s Black Workers’ Support Network to develop further understanding of the issues some colleagues experience at work and identify potential areas for further action. Significant work has been undertaken to date to develop the Work Race Equality Standard action plan and embed this in the Council’s approach and culture.

Cllr. Gordon Wheeler, our Member Equality Champion, was invited to speak at the Network’s conference held on 21 September along with Adrian Smith, Marje Toward, the Head of Human Resources and the Council’s Equalities Officer to continue these discussions.

The Council works closely with our ICS partners, and this is particularly effective in the areas of equality, diversity, and inclusion. The Council is also taking part in an event led by the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Equality lead for Nottingham University at the end of September to agree practical steps to be taken by a range of partners across Nottinghamshire.

Whilst the significance of particular dates is important to mark progress and to reflect, these real actions will ensure the Council is a truly inclusive place to work.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Personnel, from Councillor Jason Zadrozny

How many members of the Conservative Party has this County Council employed in its communications and marketing team and will you remind members of the full annual cost of the Communications and Marketing team compared to May 6 2021?

Response from Councillor Gordon Wheeler, Cabinet Member for Personnel

Employees of the County Council are free to join any legally constituted political party and are not required to share this personal information with the Council as their employer. Officers are required to serve the Council as a whole and not allow their own personal or political opinions to interfere with their work.

The total annual budget for the Communications and Marketing team in 2021/22 was slightly less than £1 million. The Communications team overall budget remains broadly the same in the financial year 2022/23 at approximately £1 million.