

APPENDIX A

1 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR JANE FLETCHER (Deferred from December meeting)

Do you think that closing the community pools will increase participation at Salt Ayre?

Councillor Fletcher replied that she recognised the value of community pools, but as no decision had as yet been taken on the future of community pools in the District, this was not the time to speculate.

2 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR ANNE CHAPMAN TO COUNCILLOR DAVID KERR

How many council houses are empty? How many have been empty for more than a month?

Councillor Kerr replied: 'At any one time Council Housing have between 40 and 50 void Council dwellings which is about 1.3% of the stock. At the time of asking this question there are 49 void properties and 28 of those have been vacant for more than a month.'

Re-letting of voids is a key performance indicator for Council Housing and they have a target of 32 days which is monitored at the Quarterly Performance Review Team meetings. At the last Quarter 2 meeting it was noted that performance was down to about 45 days and the main reason for this was the increasingly poor condition that dwellings were being left in. I have agreed a performance improvement action plan with Council Housing Officers and its effectiveness will be reviewed at the Quarter 3 Performance Review meeting. I can tell you that the update at the end of Q3 is that this figure has come down to 43 – I can also provide you with details of the number of properties this represents in writing.'

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Chapman asked for confirmation that this meant there were no long term vacant properties and that all were filled within 2 months.

Councillor Kerr confirmed that the target was to reduce the target to 43 days and he would not want to see any longer than that except for the occasional cases where there is a legal problem with a tenancy.

3 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR EVELYN ARCHER

Is the Council fully committed to a new build scheme on the Chatsworth Gardens site?'

Councillor Archer replied that she would answer this question and the next two also relating to Chatsworth Gardens at the same time.

'Following a Cabinet resolution in November, officers were asked to progress negotiations with the Homes and Communities Agency and bring a further report to Cabinet. Cabinet will consider this report at the February meeting. I cannot therefore answer this or the next 2 questions until Cabinet has had that report.'

By way of a supplementary question Councillor Robinson advised that he had some knowledge of the meeting referred to and it was his view that until the Council showed their commitment to the scheme the funders (HCA) would not negotiate with the developers to bridge any funding gap. He therefore asked Councillor Archer if she thought that the Council should get a move on.

Councillor Archer replied that it didn't matter how often Councillor Robinson asked the question, she shared his concerns over the Exemplar project but she was not able to answer any questions until the report was before Cabinet.

4 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR EVELYN ARCHER

Is the Council satisfied that funding for a conversion scheme on the Chatsworth Gardens site is no longer economically viable?

See (3) above.

5 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR EVELYN ARCHER

Is the Council satisfied that the funding for the Chatsworth Gardens site can not be used elsewhere in the West End?

See (3) above.

6 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR ROGER MACE

Area Based Grant, as the name suggests, was designed for specifically for areas with high levels of deprivation. Why is the Council appropriating this area specific funding into the General Fund?

Councillor Mace thanked Councillor Robinson for his question, which as always was interesting. He replied: 'Area Based Grant has been allocated to Councils to spend on their priorities. It is not ringfenced to any particular activity or area of the district. For the next financial year, you will see in today's budget report that Cabinet is recommending to Council that the ABG be used to help bridge the general fund revenue budget deficit to enable Council to limit the annual increase in Council Tax to no more than 4%. In the light of the current budget position, Cabinet believe that this is the best use of these monies from which all local taxpayers will benefit.'

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Robinson asked if the potential impact on crime figures in the West End and the resultant cost to tax payers that way had been considered.

Councillor Mace confirmed that it had.

7 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR ROGER MACE

It is assumed that closing the office on Albert Road will, after redundancy payments, result in revenue saving of £158k. However, managing the Chatsworth Gardens site from Lancaster Town Hall has not been fully costed (insurance, litter picking,

vandalism, break ins etc). In the light of this revelation, what is the likely revenue saving over the next two/ three years?

Councillor Mace replied: 'The 'Chatsworth Gardens' Exemplar project currently has input from a variety of council resources ranging from expert legal and financial work, to project and property management. Since June 2008, the management of the Chatsworth Gardens project has been undertaken by Council officers based across the council, in Lancaster Town Hall, Morecambe Town Hall, and at CCDS at White Lund.

'The costs of managing the exemplar scheme from the 1st April 2009 onwards are currently the subject of ongoing discussions with the Homes and Communities Agency.

'The current funding for the running of the Albert Road offices is from a variety of sources, all of which come to an end on the 31st March 2009. The need for Offices at Albert Road after the 31st March 2009 will be dependent on the council's overall accommodation requirements to deliver its corporate priorities. A report will be presented to February's Cabinet to consider the financial matters that you refer to and the future options for the building.

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Robinson asked if the Chatsworth Gardens site was a Corporate Priority.

Councillor Mace replied that it would be necessary to wait for the report to Cabinet in February in order to answer that.

8 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON COUNCILLOR DAVID KERR

Does the Council recognise that social rented housing in the West End would be a direct contradiction to the strategic aims and objectives of West End regeneration?'

Councillor Kerr replied that he would respond to this question and the following together.

'The Council is able to make a distinction between the desirable aim of encouraging social rented provision in the district and the regeneration objectives in the West End of Morecambe. Whilst there remains a danger of creating an imbalanced housing market in the West End by over provision of rented housing, then the regeneration objective of discouraging social rent in this area should take precedence. And this is reflected in the objectives of the West End Masterplan. The Council will, however, have to generally take account of the fact that the current radical changes in the housing market will mean that some stereotypes about the profile of those accessing social housing may need to change, if that is supported by evidence.

'The Council, if it is to play a leading role in enabling access to housing, would expect to embrace new forms of tenure, including rent to buy where appropriate. Whether this means of access to new housing should be used in the West end would be a matter for careful consideration. If it were to be accessed by persons traditionally able to access owner occupation than in reality there should be no hesitation. If it were also open to access by social rented tenants, then that would be another matter.

'Current documents on the provision of affordable housing are now becoming out-dated in the light of the major changes occurring to the housing market. How new

forms will be delivered in the light of the Government's recent responses to the issue will have to be the subject of revised planning guidance.

By way of a supplementary question Councillor Robinson asked if this meant that in future there may be social rented housing in the West End.

Councillor Kerr replied that the West End Masterplan had identified the need for homes amongst its priorities and homes need to be provided for the homeless who originated from the area to enable them to stay there.

9 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR PETER ROBINSON TO COUNCILLOR DAVID KERR

Does the Council support the principle of 'Rent to Buy', and will the Council apply this principle in the West End should pressure be brought for social rented housing in the West End?

See (9) above.

10 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR JOHN BARNES TO COUNCILLOR ABBOTT BRYNING

Withdrawn in the absence of Councillor Barnes.

11 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CHRIS COATES TO COUNCILLOR DAVID KERR

How is it that a council tenant receiving full housing benefit and in effect paying no rent whilst he was alive can be charged full rent for a number of weeks after he has died?

Councillor Kerr expressed his condolences to the family concerned but replied that unfortunately in law a tenancy does not automatically end on the death of a tenant. Housing Benefit regulations only provide for Housing Benefit to be paid while a tenant lives in the property. Entitlement to benefit ends as soon as a tenant leaves the property. This condition also applies if a tenant dies, as entitlement ends on date of death. He was sorry but there was no way of changing the legislation.

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Coates pointed out the Council did have discretion not to charge rent and asked the Cabinet Member if he would consider using discretionary powers not to charge rent in such circumstances.

Councillor Kerr replied that this was a difficult question to answer off the cuff – this would mean that people paying full rent would be asked to subsidise non payers, but he agreed to ask officers to look at the implications.

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