

**1 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR TONY JOHNSON TO COUNCILLOR EILEEN BLAMIRE**

Could the Cabinet Member explain in simple terms the Council's Cloud Strategy?

Councillor Blamire responded that the Council did not currently have a formal strategy regarding Cloud computing. However the Information Services Manager had provided her with a briefing note which she agreed to pass on to Councillor Johnson.

By way of a supplementary question, Councillor Johnson asked if the Council would monitor progress with Cloud. Councillor Blamire assured him that the Information Services Manager was monitoring the situation and would continue to do so.

**2 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR RICHARD ROLLINS TO COUNCILLOR DAVID SMITH**

Whilst council staff/contractors perform quite well in clearing litter from most footpaths and maintained verges, it is noticeable that adjacent hedges, woodland and bushy areas are going untended and that in addition many tourist information signs throughout the district have been covered in graffiti for some months.

In view of the poor impression this gives to residents and visitors alike, would Councillor Smith ensure that key tourist areas from Heysham through to Lancaster are cleaned up before Easter, with particular attention to the well used Lancaster – Morecambe cycle way and path where the tourist information signs are unreadable and littered hedgerows are particularly prominent opposite Asda and the Leisure Centre?

Councillor David Smith informed Councillor Rollins that the brown tourist information signs were the responsibility of the County Council. The City Council had recently undertaken an audit of them all throughout the district, which had involved photographing each sign. The intention was then to liaise with County to make improvements.

Councillor Smith went on to say that scheduled maintenance of hedgerows did take place on a planned basis and the problems tended to become more noticeable in the winter when hedges without leaves trapped litter blown by the wind. With regard to the cycle track specifically there were four parties involved in that area, the City and County Councils, Asda and the Housing Association. Whilst not all the hedgerows on the cycle track were the responsibility of the City Council, officers were aware of the problem and had plans to carry out a “spring clean” with the assistance of Community Payback workers.

**3 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CERI MUMFORD TO COUNCILLOR KAREN LEYTHAM**

Can Councillor Leytham confirm that there is no legislative demand from the Government to converge council rents with other social housing and explain why we are paying £32 million to central Government for the freedom to set and keep our council rents if there is a fear we will not in fact have the freedom to do what we wish?

Councillor Leytham confirmed that there was no legislative demand from the government to achieve convergence in social housing rents, although the Government had assumed that councils like Lancaster City Council would follow the current convergence policy, in calculating the £32M the Council needed to pay under self financing (effectively to buy the Council out of the housing subsidy system).The

self-financing arrangements would give the Council freedom not only to set its own rent policy but also to determine how it invested and improved its housing stock, and as referred to in the budget report, those were things that the Council would develop more over 2012/13.

Councillor Leytham went on to explain that there were other pressures and challenges in rent setting though, as well as investment. Changes in welfare reforms and tenancies might have significant implications. That was why, for the time-being at least, the decision had been taken to stay with setting rents in line with national convergence policy. This kept the Council's options open as far as possible, and some other Councils had taken the same approach.

#### **4 QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR CERI MUMFORD TO COUNCILLOR KAREN LEYTHAM**

***(This question on notice was asked and answered during the questions about the Housing Revenue Account earlier in the meeting when agenda item 8 was considered. Minute number 96 refers.)***

Can we have details of the research and consultation done by Council into the numbers affected as well as the effects on low-paid workers of this increase, given that the budget states the priority is to provide protection for the most vulnerable.

Councillor Leytham replied that the Council had not carried out any specific research into the effects of the increase on low paid workers. Such a detailed piece of work would require a substantial amount of time and investment. However, a broad analysis of the number of tenants receiving housing benefit had been undertaken and included in the Cabinet report. In summary, around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of tenants received some help with their rents, with around 40% of all tenants receiving full benefit. By the very nature of the current benefits system, the most vulnerable would receive greater support.

Regarding consultation, Councillor Leytham said that this had been undertaken with the district wide tenants forum. At the meeting held on the 11 January 2012 there were 10 tenant representatives and 3 council members including herself. Following discussion in the Forum the tenant representatives expressed the view that, although the percentage increase was high, they still considered council housing rents value for money and wanted to ensure that the levels of investment in the housing stock was maintained and the way was left open to look at wider investment options. This was the unanimous view of the tenant representatives.

Around a quarter of tenants paid their own rent in full. Whilst Councillor Leytham appreciated that these may well be working families on low incomes who were also vulnerable, some of them would be protected through the housing benefit system. Even with the increase, council rents would still be amongst the cheapest rents in the district.