

Council 19 July 2012 Written Questions

1. Councillor Ashton to the Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources

This Council has a property portfolio in excess of £100 million and generates a rental in excess of £6 million. Should we therefore not ensure we have a full time Head Of Property to maximise this portfolio?

This position has been vacant for 2 years and are now looking at a temporary contract. Could it be explained why this is the case?

Response:

The Council does recognise the importance of its property portfolio and the recent restructure of the former Property and Building Services function has been designed to allow the new Head of Service to be focused on the strategic management of the Council's property assets: administrative, operational and commercial.

Attempts to recruit to the post have been unsuccessful, to date; but a further set of interviews took place on 17 and 18 July 2012. There has been a good field of applicants and we are hopeful an appointment will be made. The Council has also recently appointed to a part-time Asset Development Project Manager post for an initial 4-month period to complement the current acting-up arrangements and in order to ensure that there is further capacity within the service pending an appointment to the head of service post.

There are a number of external changes impacting on Council services and these changes, and the Council's financial pressures, mean we need to retain flexibility about future management structures. Because of this the council has appointed a number of recent head of service posts on a fixed-term basis. This will allow the Council more flexibility to review and adapt management structures as we go forward.

2. Councillor Ashton to the Executive Councillor for Housing

Housing and how we reduce the 8000+ waiting list continues to be the major concern for this Council. To this end could I ask how many empty offices/warehouses are available in Cambridge and how long they have remained empty?

I can think of units that have been empty for 3 years; Kings Court, Kilmaine Close, TechnoPark, Newmarket Road, Brookmount, King Hedges

Other Members will probably be able to cite others.

We continue to allow the building of these units whilst allowing premises to remain empty for years. Could we therefore not consider bringing some of these empty units into use for Social Housing needs?

Response:

The Housing Waiting list

At April 2012, there were 8,204 'live' applicants for social housing to rent on the Council's Home-Link housing register (including new applicants and those already in social housing applying to transfer).

Applicants applying for housing on the register are placed into one of four priority bands, A-D. At April 2012 the number of applicants in each band was as follows:

- Band A: 306
- Band B: 666
- Band C: 4,171
- Band D: 3,061

Bands A-C are for applicants considered to be in 'Urgent', 'High', and 'Medium' need – examples include those who are homeless, have medical reasons for needing to move, are living in overcrowded conditions, etc. Around 62% of applicants in the City are in priority bands A-C.

Band D is for those who do not fall into any of the priority Bands A-C. Although this Band is labelled 'adequately housed', this applies to the suitability of their current accommodation itself, not whether they can afford to remain there. The main reason cited by Band D applicants for wanting to move (other than existing social tenants wanting to transfer) is that they are finding it difficult to afford to remain in their current accommodation. (The sub-regional and Cambridge City Lettings policies, including decisions on how applicants should be 'banded', are currently being reviewed).

Offices and warehouse vacancy levels in Cambridge City Council Area

The revenues and benefits service maintain a database of all business properties in the City as part of their business rate collection responsibilities. There are 3963 business properties in the City and multiple changes in occupancy taking place at any one time. Information on vacancies is collected and the most recent data (June 2012) shows there are 430 vacant business properties (the data base does not however distinguish between types of business properties so includes retail). The data collected does not identify how long premises have been vacant as business rate liability resumes after the expiry of 3 and 6-month void periods depending on whether they are offices or industrial units. A detailed survey including of local property agents records would be needed to answer this question precisely.

Existing and future planning policy in Cambridge as it relates to business premises

There is an ongoing concern that there should be a diversity of employment opportunities and a full range of services in Cambridge. In an attempt to maintain some balance in the economy, the best industrial/storage sites in Cambridge are specifically protected from redevelopment for other uses, whilst other industrial/storage sites across the City can only be redeveloped for alternative uses if certain criteria are met. In essence, a policy of 'protect the best, evaluate the rest'. Offices are not protected by current planning policy in Cambridge. The Local Plan Review is considering whether they should be protected in the future.

The planning service is in regular contact with land owners and developers and former industrial and commercial sites that are suitable for housing re-development are clearly already being brought forward where this is appropriate e.g. Harvest Way off Newmarket Road and sites on Cromwell Road. These re-development opportunities do contribute to the delivery of affordable housing as a target of 40% will be sought from each qualifying site.

Employment Land Review

The Council has recently commissioned consultants to undertake an update to the Council's Employment Land Review to inform the review of the Local Plan and to feed into new policy development. The final Employment Land Review update is not yet published but a report with initial findings was taken to Development Plan Scrutiny Sub-Committee on 12th June 2012. Some of these initial findings that are relevant to this question are:

- A small growth of jobs in industrial/warehouse uses in Cambridge is forecast to 2031;
- In the present economic climate developer, investment and occupier interest has contracted to the most popular locations: Central Cambridge (particularly the Hills Road / Station Road area, including CB1) and the northern fringe (around Cambridge Science Park, Cambridge Business Park and St John's Innovation Centre);
- The redevelopment of old manufacturing and storage sites for employment uses often appears to be unviable and that as a result, a good number of these sites are already being lost, principally to housing. Even redevelopment of office sites is unlikely to be viable unless significant intensification of use is allowed;
- There will be considerable pressure for B1a (office) space in the city, and particularly in the city centre, where there is limited land. The only way around this is to intensify existing uses; allocating more land in peripheral locations will not help core dynamic growth for the high tech cluster. There is, therefore, a need to look systematically at the potential for intensification of use in the city centre;
- It will be important to ensure that there is sufficient land for manufacturing in the area. Where possible, existing manufacturing sites within and close to Cambridge should be protected from loss to housing or retail, but equally it is important to recognise that market factors dictate that this will not be possible in all cases. Therefore alternative provision is necessary, including at Northstowe and other places not previously considered, e.g. Cambridge Research Park. The increasing importance of hybrid buildings which enable flexibility of use needs to be recognised in the way in which sites are designated for different uses.
- there is very little availability in the prime city centre location around Hills Road and Station Road. In the wider central area (e.g. Castle Hill, Westbrook Centre, Clifton Road, etc.), three-quarters of the vacant space is in secondary offices. In total, the central area accounts for less than a quarter of the total vacant office and R&D space in the area (that was surveyed for the study).

National changes to the Use Classes Order

In Spring / Summer of last year (2011) the government consulted on changes to the Use Classes Order to grant permitted development rights to changes of use from commercial use to residential use, i.e. to allow such changes without the need for planning permission. The intention of this change was to make use of empty premises and to help meet the housing need. This would have included offices and warehouses.

Earlier this month (3rd July 2012) the government responded to the consultation responses and announced what it intended to do. The full changes that were consulted upon were not enacted due to the difficulties that would have arisen were commercial uses able to change to residential without planning permission. These difficulties include:

- The need for local employment land; and
- The need for housing to be in the right location.

The original proposals were dropped; in their place the government announced the following actions:

- To include a new policy in the National Planning Policy Framework, to be read in the wider context of the Framework document, that local planning authorities '*...should normally approve planning applications for change to residential use and any associated development from commercial buildings (currently in the B use classes) where there is an identified need for additional housing in that area, provided that there are not strong economic reasons why such development would be inappropriate...*' and
- To amend the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (as amended) to extend existing permitted development rights which allow the space above shops and other town centre uses (A1 and A2 uses) to be converted into a single flat without the need to submit a planning application, to allow for 2 flats

The Council's House Building programme

The Council has recently initiated its own house-building programme under the new self-financing business model available to local authorities. 250 new housing units have been planned and future investment in further units is being looked at. The options for new home provision will evaluate all reasonable alternatives and could include redeveloping previously vacant industrial land/premises where this has the support of planning policy.