

Written Questions – Council 25 February 2010

1. Cllr Newbold to the Executive Councillor for Environmental Health and Waste Services

At its meeting on 24 April 2008, this Council unanimously agreed to Labour's proposal to make Cambridge a 'plastic bag free zone', with the aspiration of city residents switching to reusable shopping bags by the end of 2009. The motion stated that "the Executive Councillor for Environmental Waste Services will oversee the development of proposals for a citywide campaign to help retailers switch to reusable bags, including writing to and meeting with retailers, our major city shopping centres, local shopping centres, and local retail federation representatives. This work shall also extend to the LGA to help national chains to switch to reusable bags and to the Government to reduce packaging in general". Can the Executive Councillor for Climate Change and Growth explain what efforts have been made in this regard, in particular by his department, to realise this commitment?

In July 2009 the government announced that the number of single-use carrier bags given out had been reduced by 48% compared with a baseline figure for 2006. Most grocery retailers are now engaged in ways to cut the number of carrier bags in circulation, through for example charging policies or giving money or loyalty points to the customer for not using a plastic bag or promoting re-useable bags. It is recognised that although plastic carrier bags represent less than 1% of household waste they are considered by many to be an icon of a "throwaway society" and contribute to visible litter.

In Cambridge, the council has promoted the reduction of plastic carrier bags for many years, with initiatives such as the Slim Your Bin road-shows where cloth bags were handed out to residents before they went into the supermarket. The Sustainable City team have also promoted the use of cloth bags in order to encourage the reduction of plastic ones. These activities predate the April 2008 motion which unanimously noted the Council 's long standing campaigns to provide shoppers with long-lasting cloth bags.

More recently and directly related to the motion above, the Council has been involved with the campaign to make Mill Road 'plastic bag free' which was officially launched on Saturday 6th Dec 2008, with over 100 shops (out of 120) signed up to reduce the use of plastic carrier bags, which are having a detrimental effect on the environment. This campaign was agreed in conjunction with the Council and retailers. The Council supported the campaign with officer time and funding for cloth bags. The campaign was fairly intensive over a 6 month period and although sign up by retailers was good it was not necessarily matched by action. Small retailers have difficulties maintaining momentum with such initiatives without the necessary support from the community and ownership of the scheme. This community approach was the key to the success of the Modbury initiative in Devon.

The RECAP (Recycling in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough) partnership and Cambridge City Council funded the production of 1,600 specially printed reusable bags, which were given out to visitors to the Mill Road Winter Fair.

The Council has submitted a proposal to the LGA along with other Councils as part of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 following a community workshop with the 'Panel of Representatives of Local Persons' which asks the government to introduce legislation to reduce the amount of packaging on all retail goods. Although the submission was unfortunately rejected other authorities suggested schemes more focused on plastic bags have been taken forward by the LGA and the City Council hopes that these will be implemented.

The Council will wait to see what national developments occur before committing any further resource to the motion, although some of this may be included in work on waste minimisation already in the service plan for 2010 –11.

2. Cllr Herbert to the Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources

What are the causes of the excess level of staff sickness absence this year and what measures are being taken to further understand the causes and specifically to reduce absence levels?

Staff Sickness levels 2009 -2010

The staff sickness level for the 12 months to January 2010 is 10.47 days per person against an annual target of 7.7 days per person.

Data for 2009/10 indicates that absence levels are higher now than in previous years. The last four years absence has shown an underlying trend of 9.43 days.

2005/6 – 9.56 days

2006/7 - 9.34 days

2007/8 - 9.26 days

2008/9 - 9.57 days

Reasons for Absence

The breakdown of reasons for absence shows:

Reason	% days lost by reason
Stress/Depression & Mental Health	22.70%
Viral Infection	17.68%
Other Muscular - Skeletal Problems	15.20%
Stomach, Liver, Kidney & Digestion	11.49%
Back Problem	8.38%
Operations, post -operative & Hospital	7.77%
Other	4.15%
Chest, Respiratory	3.68%
Heart, Blood pressure & Circulation	2.78%
Eye, Ear, Nose & Mouth/Dental	2.44%
Headaches & Migraines	2.08%
Pregnancy Related	1.01%
Genito-urinary	0.64%

% Of Sickness (Lost Days)

	Number of Staff	Number of Lost Days	% of days	% (cum)
0 Days	312	0	0.00%	20.45%
0.1 - 5 Days	448	1108.09	9.54%	
5.1 - 10 Days	165	1267.28	10.91%	
10.1 - 30 Days	156	2750.98	23.68%	79.55%
30+ Days	99	6488.67	55.86%	
	1180	11615.02		

A breakdown of sickness absence by numbers of staff and days, shown above, indicates that 64% of staff have less than 5 days sickness absence per annum, i.e below the target of 7.7 days. 312 (26.44%) of staff have had no sickness.

8.4% of staff (99) account for 56% of absence.

The data indicates that it is long-term sickness absence that needs to be addressed in order to improve sickness absence levels.

Departmental Breakdown

The following shows a breakdown of absence by department, long term is defined as more than 10 days:

	Headcount	Days Lost (Avg)	Long term %	Short term %
Chief Executives	26	4.78	74.1%	25.9%
City Services	420	14.30	73.4%	26.6%
Community Services	346	9.48	56.2%	43.8%
Customer and Democratic	94	8.88	44.3%	55.7%
Environment and Planning	178	5.50	55.7%	44.3%
Finance	116	8.43	58%	42.0%
Corporate Total	1180	10.47	65.0%	35.0%

Action being taken to address increasing levels of sickness absence

In response to rising sickness levels we are taking a range of measures, outlined below:

- Every manager is required to carry out return to work interviews with the member of staff after every period of sickness absence
- absence reporting and management information is used by HR Business Partners in discussion with managers, the Chief Executive, Directors and Heads of Service to understand the data and take appropriate action with relevant staff.
- the content and quality of reports has been improved to identify targeted action with relevant staff.
- Absence monitoring trigger points are set and meetings are held with relevant staff.
- Occupational Health provide action orientated medical information for us to make decisions.

The Occupational Health Nurse service is used to speed up access to relevant medical information and where trigger points have been met.

- Managers retain regular contact with long term absent employees to aid return
- Phased returns and redeployment are increasingly being used to aid earlier return or transfer to more suitable work
- Disciplinary action, including dismissal is taken in appropriate cases.
- The manager sickness absence training has been revised to focus on taking action
- We are piloting the use of the HSE Management Standards (on stress) in 2010
- We are increasing opportunities for flexible and remote working as alternatives to absence where some working is possible

Managers need to maintain focus on managing sickness absence.

3. Cllr Walker to the Executive Councillor for Customer Services and Resources

In the light of the recent Mellor and Wilson Employment Tribunal judgment,

a) What measures have been put in place to give us confidence that the City Council will handle redeployment and redundancies fairly and properly in the future?

We believe we have fair and equitable employment policies and are disappointed with the Employment Tribunal decision in this case. However, we accept their findings and have taken on board the comments of the Employment Tribunal. We have reviewed our redeployment practice, making amendments to the arrangements for contacting people in the redeployment pool, and have reconfirmed the approval process for redundancies.

The Council has successfully redeployed 7 staff since February 2009, thereby minimising the impact of redundancy. Of the 28 redundancies made by the Council since February 2009, only this case has been heard at an Employment Tribunal.

b) How much did this case cost the Council, including officer time?

The Employment Tribunal awarded compensation of £21,161 to Ms Mellor and awarded no compensation to Mr Wilson. The cost in legal fees of this Employment Tribunal was £19,500 (barrister's fees). In addition there were costs of £20,811 in officer time within legal services, which was carried out within existing resources. The total actual cost to the Council therefore is £40,686.21 net of in-house officer time, and £61,497.22 including this time. HR do not have a time recording system and do not have an indicative cost of HR officer time.

4. Cllr Walker to the Executive Councillor for Climate Change and Growth

Regarding the Snowy Farr and Mill Road Cemetery Art Projects

1. Has the contract for the art consultant now been finalised?

The contract for the Art Consultant has been finalised and was signed by the Consultant from "Plan Projects" on February 18, 2010. Officers will now be seeking dates from the Project Steering Groups to meet and take the projects forward.

2. How long has the procurement process taken and why?

To date the process for the artwork commissions have been as follows, the following is a summary only:

The Executive Councillor for Climate Change and Growth gave approval of funding for both commissions in March 2009, and Full Council approval of the commissions was given in April 2009.

Project Steering Groups were arranged in May, 2009, and in June of 2009 the Project Appraisal was approved by the Executive Councillor for Climate Change and Growth.

Project Steering Groups met in July 2009 to agree the approach to the commissions and consultant tendering, thereafter Invitations to Tender for consultant services to oversee one or both of the projects was prepared and posted with an "expressions of interest" period closing period expiring early September.

In October 2009, Project Steering Groups for both commissions met and agreed to the appointment of Plan Projects, arts consultant, to oversee both commissions.

Contract preparation and procurement arrangements prepared in November and December 2009. Subsequently the final contract was prepared in January 2010 and signed by the consultant in February 2010.

3. Given that the Snowy Farr proposal is now three years old, when will both projects be completed?

We are targeting the completion of both commissions by the end of 2010, although this target will be dependent on consultation responses to artist ideas, and is dependent on fabrication requirements for agreed art works as well as planning and other approvals being in place.

5. Cllr Herbert to the Executive Councillor for Housing

a) How many disabled Council tenants will be affected by new retrospective service charges for essential aids, that have until now been provided at no extra charge ?

Currently it is anticipated that charges will be levied to 38 tenants. The charge is based upon recovering the cost of annual servicing and not installation or repair to the equipment.

b) What is the projected total income to the Council from this policy change?

£4,731.36 based upon those who currently have equipment installed being charged the full cost of servicing. However proposals for introducing a tapered charge are being drawn up, in line with past practice for introducing new charges. For other services this has been set at between 75p - £1.25 increase per annum plus inflation.

c) What is the range of new annual charges being applied, and the minimum and maximum total amounts that individual tenants will have to pay ?

The final charges have yet to be agreed. Ranges of cost of servicing the equipment are from £0.73 per week (£35.04 per annum) for a piece of lifting equipment to £5.10 per week (£244.80) for a specialist bath. A tenant may have more than one piece of equipment or more than one lifting device. The highest cost for servicing multiple equipment for an individual tenant is £9.58 per week

d) What is the maximum age of equipment for which an additional service charge is now to be levied ?

The oldest entry on the database for equipment still in use is for 3 items installed in 1995.