

Scrutiny Committee 8th September Public Questions and Answers

Name of person submitting	Questions
Paul Elstone	Regarding Agenda Item 8: Establishment Report Question 1: My point of reference is Section 4.0 Establishment - Table 2. A table which shows the staff numbers for this Council and associated payroll plus pension cost over the period 2021 to 2025. It is noted that over the period the total number people employed increased from 728 to 782, an increase of 7%. That the total Taxable Gross Pay rose from £12.197 million to £14.916 million, a payroll increase of 22%. Yet the employers pension payments increased from £1.938 million to £2.749 million. A massive increase of 41%. Please fully explain why there is such a massive increase in pension costs. Pension cost which are greatly out of step with the staff and payroll increases. Response from the Chair of Scrutiny Committee: There are a number of reasons for the increase over the time period in question. The Employer Pension costs are determined by contributions made on behalf of each employee within the pension scheme. It is a set percentage contribution, therefore the higher the individuals salary, the higher the level of contribution. The main explanation for the increase in employer contributions is due to the change in contribution rates, set out by the last tri-annual valuation. This applied from 2023/24, hence the step change in that year, where the employee contribution rate increased from 16.6% to 19%. The rate is decided by the Pensions Fund Actuary, Barnet Waddingham, with the Council having very little influence. This change in rate applies to current staff to meet the future ongoing pension costs. The levels of contribution will increase as an employee's salary rises through annual inflationary pay awards and progression through the spinal points within a grade. Table 2 spans a 4 year period to include 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25. In this time there have been four pay awards to reflect the inflationary cost of living pressures which are both negotiated and settled nationally between the LGA and the Unions. This has seen the equivalent of each individual employee receiving an average pay ward of 3.04% per year.

Over the past four year period our average paid FTE Establishment has increased from 426.43 to 443.07 whilst our agency usage and expenditure has receded, as shown in the table. This will cause an increase in pension contributions due to auto enrolment and because pension contributions are not paid for agency staff.

Question 2: What is the current annual cost of the pension scheme administration fees?

Response from the Chair of Scrutiny Committee:

The cost of administering the scheme was £57k for 2024/25. This is charged directly to the pension fund.

Question 3: Where can details of this Councils pension fund financial status be found for public viewing?

Response from the Chair of Scrutiny Committee:

The details of the council's pension fund can be found within the annual Statement of Accounts, published online.

Regarding Agenda Item 11 - Work Program

Question 4: At the Cabinet meeting of the 2 September 2025, I asked the following question related to the Freedom of Information Policy:-

"Will this Cabinet request that Scrutiny Committee implement a full review into how the Freedom of Information (FOI) System is really functioning especially as Members of this Council are now having their integrity and reputation challenged when their responses to public questions are found to be incorrect?"

Additionally, I provided an example of both exceptional delays being experienced in receiving answers to FOI request and a lack of integrity in the answers received.

Another member of the public provided examples of similar FOI issues at the same meeting.

The response from the Council Leader was totally dismissive even making an incorrect statement about the three other Council's FOI performance without even knowing who they were and without any factual evidence to support.

Most disturbingly, the Council Leader was publicly dismissive of Information Commissioner judgements against this Council in connection with its Freedom of Information system failings.

Will Scrutiny Committee implement a full review into why the Freedom of Information System is failing to properly function in this Council? Especially so when irrefutable evidence that exist, yes irrefutable evidence, to show that there are quite serious integrity and reputational issues resulting?

The Chair explained that with regard to the last question this item would be on the agenda at the next meeting on 29 September 2025. All other questions would be answered, in writing, within ten working days.

Supplemental Question:

Can you confirm that's this is relating to how the Freedom of Information system is truly functioning or was that another review?

Response from the Chair of Scrutiny Committee:

This question was addressed, it will brought to a future meeting. I can be confirmed that The Freedom of Information Dashboard for 2025/26 for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 will be presented at the meeting of Scrutiny on the 20th October 2025. The Cabinet does not direct Scrutiny to examine matters it is for Scrutiny to produce its work programme any council member or member of the public can request a matter is considered by completing the appropriate form available on line.