MEETING

24th OCTOBER 2011

ORAL QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Russell Mellor of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

I would be obliged if the Portfolio Holder for Resources could advise me as to the number of mortgage rescues the Council has undertaken in the last Civic year ending the 5th April 2011, and the number for the current year to date together with the respective amounts in the singular and collective form.

Reply:
The Portfolio Holder advised that in the Year 2010/11 the number of mortgage rescues undertaken were:
- 75 households to prevent mortgage repossession through active casework, negotiation and money advice;
- 19 successful completions under the Government mortgage rescue scheme via London & Quadrant Housing Trust;
- 2 secured loans were provided from the preventing repossession grant to facilitate mortgage rescue; and
- 1 mortgage rescue through purchase and conversion to shared ownership via Town & Country Housing Group.

In the current year 2011/12 22 households had been provided with active casework, negotiation and money advice to prevent mortgage repossession. As a result of the funding reduction along with tightening of the eligibility criteria those benefiting under the Government rescue scheme had reduced to 6 referred, 2 withdrawn, 0 completed.

Councillor Mellor did not have a supplementary question.

2. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop JP of the Leader of the Council

With regard to the use of Crofton School as a polling station, how many requests were received to maintain the status quo and how many requests were received requesting the polling station be changed.

Reply:

The Leader replied that regarding Crofton School there was just one request which was then supported by three other people.

Councillor Fawthrop did not have a supplementary question as he would be addressing this issue in respect of the report later on the agenda for tonight's meeting.

3. From Councillor John Getgood of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

What are the results of the recruitment process for the new Libraries shared service with Bexley Council?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder explained that the number of staff effected by the shared services from Bromley was 36 and from Bexley 35, in total 71. The number of new posts available in the shared service was 33.75 (Full Time Equivalents). Bromley had succeeded in appointing 14 of its staff and Bexley 21 and there were 2 vacancies still to be appointed to.

The number of staff at Bromley taking Voluntary Redundancies or Early Retirement totalled 16 so that left a total of 6 staff who had not taken early retirement or had not been appointed to any posts and efforts were being made to seek redeployment to posts within the Council as was Bexley doing in respect of its staff.

Supplementary question:

Councillor Getgood asked whether the Portfolio Holder was aware of the hit to morale in Bromley staff within the service as a result of this situation where the feeling was that it was a take over of Bromley Libraries by Bexley as a greater number of the senior posts had been taken by Bexley staff. He was also aware that Bexley wanted to continue with its bid and take over Croydon Libraries. Councillor Getgood asked what the Portfolio Holder would do to try and maintain the morale of staff in Bromley to ensure that they would be able to provide a full service as there were already reports that there would not be enough people left to continue a full service. With this announcement on staff numbers he thought it would be impossible to maintain the current number of libraries and the opening times. He asked when the Portfolio Holder would announce what further plans he had to reduce the Library service in Bromley.

Reply:

Councillor Morgan responded that the issue of maintaining morale was always difficult in circumstances like these and he was sympathetic to all the staff concerned both in Bromley and Bexley who had had to deal with great uncertainty over the last few months. He congratulated those who had been successful in their appointments. As to the level of staff in each authority the selection had been done on an objective basis and if Bromley staff had not been successful then he was sorry but that was the way it had been. As for the future staffing of the libraries he was content with the arrangements and that all the libraries would be able to function on the present hours they had. There were no current plans to change the number of libraries or their opening hours.

4. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

According to his Chancellor, 500,000 jobs have been created in the private sector since the General Election. How many of them are in Bromley?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that he was unable to answer this question as the information was not readily available at local government or regional level. It was understood that this calculation was done by the Labour force survey and whilst it would be possible to get some data from the Office of National Statistics it would be at some expense to the ratepayer. If Councillor Fookes insisted then he would do that if the Councillor thought it was worthwhile. However, the data that had been produced to give the figure that the Chancellor announced was based on a sample survey not a census. Therefore as soon as it was reduced to a smaller sample size as in one Borough the figures became very unreliable. There was also the danger that the figures might reveal details about an individual. What he could tell members was that the unemployment level in Bromley was not too bad. The Job Seekers Allowance in Bromley showing the number of people seeking employment was 2.9% and between July and September it had actually fallen by 206 claimants (0.16%), a trend in the right direction.

Supplementary question:

Councillor Fookes felt it was bizarre that the Chancellor could have access to this information but the Portfolio Holder could not. He commented that surely Councillor Morgan must be aware of some companies in Bromley that were actually recruiting staff.

Reply:

Councillor Morgan explained that the Council did not keep a record of what each company did – it was not part of the Council's responsibilities. Possibly the Job Centre in Bromley had some information but only in relation to claimants looking for work. It was not a surprise as he had already explained this was done as a sample survey for the whole nation not Borough by Borough. Yes firms in Bromley had clearly taken on people and that was why the numbers had fallen despite the public sector regrettably having to lose a few people. Firms in Bromley were not doing too badly as he had already stated.

5. From Councillor Russell Mellor of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

Can the Portfolio Holder advise me as to total of loans/advances made to the local Credit Unions by the Council.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder responded that the Council's accounts payable system held records going back to the 1st April 2006. Since that date, £2,100 had been paid to Lewisham Plus Credit Union by way of loans or advances. Further payments of £30,000 had also been made to the same organisation in the form of funding to support the services provided by them. No other payments have been made to local credit unions during this period.

Supplementary question:

Councillor Mellor asked whether the Portfolio Holder could advise him of the number of defaults either actual or anticipated.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur replied that he could not and he could only tell him that the £2,100 was the net amount currently owed to the Council – by 2 people and he was confident that that would be received. He also advised by way of context that the actual set up of the Union cost £90,000 which came from the Department for Work and Pensions. The amount that Bromley had paid was less than the amount paid by Lewisham and it was approved by the two Portfolio Holders concerned who had had a full report to them dated 24th November 2009.

6. From Councillor John Getgood of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

What support will he be giving to the sale of the Bromley Olympic Pin Badge in the Borough?

Reply:

Councillor Morgan explained that the Council was proposing to sell the Olympic Pin Badges in all the libraries within the Borough. A supply of pin badges was ordered from Crystal Palace Foundation, and they arrived at the Central Library last week and would be distributed shortly. They would also be offered for sale at the main Enquiry Desk. So the Council was fully supporting the availability of these badges.

Councillor Getgood did not have a supplementary question.

7. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

How many job losses have there been at Bromley Council since the General Election?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that the number of job losses through redundancy since the general election in May 2010 was 141 – this figure included 12 people on fixed term contracts. Just to clarify the number of posts deleted was 171.

Supplementary question:

Councillor Fookes asked when the Council was going to stop these job losses which were adding to unemployment in the Borough and when was something going to be done about young unemployed people. He was aware that work was being done on graduate training schemes but shouldn't the Council be looking at taking on young unemployed people in this Borough.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur responded that a straight answer to the question about stopping redundancies would be when we had balanced our books. As Councillor Fookes was aware we had a 27% cut in our budget that required the Council to cut the workforce. What was being done therefore was looking at every aspect of the Council's services to make reductions and Councillor Arthur hoped the member would take part in this as it was his party that caused the problem in the first place. A further 201 staff had actually been redeployed within other roles in the Council. Staff were showing a huge degree of flexibility, a willingness to train to those positions and the Portfolio Holder was extremely grateful for the very mature way staff were reacting.

8. From Councillor Russell Mellor of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

Can the Portfolio Holder advise me as to the Interest received on the Council reserves as the end of the last Civic year, 2010 – 2011, together with confirmation of the amount received last (previous) year 2009 – 2010.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council received interest earnings on various balances including general reserves, earmarked reserves and the amount of unused capital receipts held. The total interest earned in 2010/11 was £3,085,000 and in 2009/10 £4,887,000 was earned.

Councillor Mellor did not have a supplementary question.

9. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

What progress has been made on the suggestion of a borough wide street drinking ban?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder responded that there were currently 5 active **Designation Orders** in the Borough prohibiting alcohol consumption in public places. These were:

- Bromley Town Centre
- Bromley Town Centre Extension (covering Shortlands)
- Beckenham Town Centre
- Orpington Town Centre and
- Penge High Street (including sections of adjoining roads).

Prior to any consideration of the introduction of a Borough wide Order, Home Office guidance advised that there must be sufficient evidence of **alcohol** related anti social behaviour or disorder in '**each and every part'** of the Borough to warrant such action. In addition there must be sufficient police resources available to enforce the legislation across the Borough. To date, there had been no evidence provided by the Police to suggest that the current Designation Orders were not proving effective or that there were any significant issues relating to the displacement of street drinking in neighbouring parts of the borough which were not currently covered.

Supplementary question:

Councillor Fookes asked if the Portfolio Holder was confident that those people who were displaced from Lewisham were receiving the support they needed. He agreed that we did not want to go down the route of a borough wide order, but it was important to make sure that people who needed help with a drink problem were receiving support services as he was not sure this was happening.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens stated that everything was being done and he was not sure it was Bromley's responsibility to look after Lewisham residents. The Police had made it very clear that that they did not see any problem and the Council Officers had confirmed that there was no evidence that Lewisham residents were coming into the Borough with their drink problems because they could not drink in Lewisham. Also as he had already said there were drink bans in place in Penge and in the member's ward and if there was any need to review the situation then Councillor Stevens would do so. The situation was monitored regularly and the Portfolio Holder was satisfied with the current position.
