

MEETING

20th FEBRUARY 2012

ORAL QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Michael Tickner of the Chairman of the General Purposes and Licensing Committee

What are the total legal costs incurred by the London Borough of Bromley since 2008 in prosecuting Mr Christopher Stephens for benefit fraud?

What was the outcome of this prosecution?

Reply:

Councillor Owen gave the figure of £2,149.14 and reported that Mr Stephens had pleaded guilty on the 6th June 2011 and was sentenced to 40 hours unpaid work over 12 months plus £500 costs.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Tickner questioned whether these prosecutions were always good value for money and asked whether a report on excessive legal fees could go to the Audit Sub-Committee for them to consider the outcome of such prosecutions and see whether it was commensurate to the cost to the council tax payer.

Reply:

The Chairman replied that he was happy for this to be looked at and referred to a recent Court case in the news when £8.5m was spent on deciding whether a gift was a 'bung' and taxable. He considered that when it came to tax and value for money there were a lot of questions that needed to be answered.

2. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Leader of the Council

What response has been received 2012 from Transport for London, following the Town Centre Working Party meeting on January 31st, regarding the Atkins consultancy proposals for improving West Wickham High Street produced in 2006?

Reply:

Councillor Carr advised that West Wickham High Street was a Transport for London Route Network (TLRN) road (A232) and was the subject of a TfL-funded improvement study some years ago. However, no funds were ever

allocated for implementation. The Council was currently lobbying TfL to develop an improvement programme to bring the public realm in West Wickham High Street up to the same standard that the Council was seeking to promote in Orpington, Bromley North Village, Beckenham and other town centres. Initial contact had been made with TfL officers responsible for capital schemes on TLRN routes to explore options and the results of these discussions would be reported back to the Working Party and the Renewal & Recreation PDS Committee.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett asked whether the Leader was aware that TfL put a figure of about £3m on the Atkins proposal back in 2006 but had not committed to any expenditure. West Wickham was counted as the 4th largest Town Centre in the Borough and the plans that were put forward by TfL were very much welcomed by local councillors at the time. He asked for assurance that when Beckenham and West Wickham Town Centre Working Party had finished dealing with the urgent matters to do with Beckenham that it would move on to look at ways to lobby TfL for more money for West Wickham.

Reply:

Councillor Carr responded that definitely yes that would happen. As he had already indicated in his answer to the public questioner Town Centres were extremely important to the administration.

3. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Adult and Community Services

How many day centres for the elderly are being closed as a result of a reduction of £500,000 in the budget?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder reiterated that there were no proposals for changes to the budget for Day Centres this coming year. The implications of the proposed reduction in the budget for day opportunities for older people was currently the subject of discussions with day centre providers and representatives of older people in the community and day centre service users. The result of the consultations and detailed proposals for day opportunities for older people would be reported back to the Adult and Community Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee before any final decisions were made about the service from 2013 onwards.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes asked why the Council was undermining Day Centres and reducing their subsidy.

Reply:

Councillor Evans stated that the Council was not undermining providers of Day Opportunities for older people but was doing its best to ensure that the opportunities for elderly people through Day Centres were improved. The Department was working very hard with all the providers not just to give them further opportunity for local authority nominations but also to help them improve their way of doing business and their business cases for getting more fee paying clients. He emphasised that Day opportunities were very important.

4. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

How is the refurbishment of the North block progressing?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the refurbishment of the North Block was progressing well. Completion of the works was currently scheduled for 27th April 2012.

The installation of the windows was substantially complete. Works to the staircase were well underway. Plastering works were complete and internal decorations were also progressing well.

Electrical and Mechanical 1st fix works were substantially complete. New ceilings and the installation of new lighting into the grid were complete and flooring work had commenced.

External decorations were substantially complete and all scaffolding would be struck by 23rd February.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Owen asked whether it was true that when the windows had been put in the North Block the Sub-Contractor had subsequently alleged he had not been paid and started to take them out again. He also asked if the Portfolio Holder was happy with the arrangements between the Contractor and Sub-Contractor and whether this situation might happen again.

Reply:

Councillor Morgan confirmed that it was true that the Sub-Contractor had alleged that he had not been paid and started to remove the windows. The Police were called and he was prevented from leaving the site. Arrangements were made for him to be paid and the windows were put back in at no cost to the Council and he was satisfied everything was now on schedule.

5. From Councillor Douglas Auld of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm that recent advice received from Bromley Police Station indicates that the numbers of Police Community Safety Officers (PCSOs) is in the near future to be reduced from approximately 120 to 65.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that he could not give exact numbers as the Police had not given him the information. However he understood that by the end of this month Bromley would have 50% less PCSOs than it should have. In rough figures that would be 60 instead of 120 because 60 PCSOs had been recruited and accepted as fulltime Police Officers which was something to be proud of but at the same time such a large number leaving meant Bromley suffered as a result. Councillor Stevens had been told that Bromley might get just 5 replacements at the moment. A recruitment process was about to start and the remaining 55 places would eventually be filled over the next few months. The Portfolio Holder advised that he had asked Bromley's London Assembly member James Cleverly to confirm what was happening and to come back with more relevant information in the next few weeks. As soon as Councillor Stevens was informed he would let the member know the exact numbers.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Auld considered that it was important that the Police kept to the assurances given regarding the future level of PCSO numbers in the Borough.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens responded that action had already been taken as he was at City Hall that morning and had met with Kit Malthouse (Deputy Mayor, Policing) and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and they were very aware of our concerns as was Mr Cleverly. They had promised to look at our situation as quickly as possible and accepted that we had been unfairly hit as such a large number of PCSOs had been taken away as Police Officers. The Leader and the Portfolio Holder would continue to press for action particularly as it was understood that there were 180 PCSOs around the Met which would be made available to go back to Boroughs. Bromley residents should rightfully get a fairer allocation as 5 was not acceptable.

Councillor Stevens also apologised to the Labour Group as he considered that the written responses to their questions were completely unacceptable and he would be chasing this up to get proper answers for members.

6. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

What is the status of the proposal to extend the Bakerloo Line from the Elephant and Castle using the Hayes Line?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that the extension of the Bakerloo Line to Hayes using existing national rail infrastructure was one of a range of options being considered by Transport for London for possible rail or light rail investment in south-east London. The proposal was in its early stages and no conclusions had yet been reached regarding its viability or otherwise.

Following a presentation to Members by a TfL official on 18th January, the Environment PDS Committee resolved, among other matters, that the extension of the Bakerloo line to Hayes was to be resisted by the Council unless direct connections to Charing Cross/Cannon Street and London Bridge could be maintained.

The Portfolio Holder also took the opportunity to confirm that both TfL and the Mayor's Office had again been briefed at very senior level within the past few weeks that whilst we were also supportive of a possible Tramlink extension to Crystal Palace, this administration's priority remained to see the DLR, or less favourably, but still possibly, the Bakerloo line, extended through to at least Bromley North and ideally Bromley South, to facilitate direct access to Canary Wharf and Docklands via Lewisham to better match both our own residents' needs, as well as those of travellers from deeper Kent.

Such measures, were they to prove possible, would also serve as a much wider strategic regional investment by helping to markedly reduce overcrowding on the tube network in general, and the Jubilee line in particular, currently being aggravated as it was by travellers from South East London and Kent having to then further commute between their respective over-ground Stations to reach their places of employment in the City of London and Docklands.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett commented that he was sure no one would object to the Bakerloo line being extended to Lewisham or Bromley North. However he was certain residents of West Wickham in his Ward and those residents living by the Hayes line would be very upset if the current very good train service to Cannon Street/Waterloo East, Charing Cross and London Bridge was replaced by smaller tube trains going at a slower pace, through more stations to get to an objective that was already served by going out of Charing Cross Station across to the Bakerloo line. Whilst grateful for the reassurances Councillor Bennett felt that there was no point in replacing a train service with one that was much inferior.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that he was in complete agreement with Councillor Bennett's views as he certainly did not want duplication but rather new and fresh investment. That was why he felt Bromley North was what the Council should continue to push for.

7. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Adult and Community Services

Why does it take this authority up to six weeks to assess people who are being decanted from housing association properties for alternative accommodation?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder commented that the question had officers searching trying to find out the main point and hoped the response was right as it appeared to relate to a specific case. Where a housing tenant needed to be moved from an existing housing association property for refurbishment purposes the duty remained with the housing association to assist their tenant with alternative accommodation. The housing association may approach the council for assistance in identifying properties if they were unable to find suitable temporary accommodation.

In this particular case the tenant wished to remain in the locality and had identified a property owned by another Housing Association. The Housing Team were unaware of any approach by the Housing Association in this case. In order to be considered for the property a reassessment of their case was required. Since re-opening the housing register in mid December the assessment process was currently taking between 4 – 6 weeks. This was largely due to the number of people reapplying. The introduction of auto-banding and the new allocation policy meant that from mid March the assessment completion would be halved to between 2 – 3 weeks.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes felt that the situation might have been let down by the particular Housing Association on this occasion. However he did consider that 4 -6 weeks was unacceptable and despite the Council having excellent officers asserted that the reality was that it was due to inadequate staffing levels, particularly as the numbers of homeless people had doubled during the past year with 8000 people on the register.

Reply:

Councillor Evans responded that in respect of the homelessness situation the officers were doing an excellent job under difficult circumstances. The number of homeless people in the Borough was increasing but the

department was working very well in coping with this and looking at all sorts of different strategies to deal with the problem.

8. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

How much did it cost to put in new paving slabs outside the new Orpington library and why was it done?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the new paving slabs outside the new Orpington Library cost £8,420. They were installed because the previous surface (uneven cobbles) was proving to be a hazard to pedestrians. At least four accidents had been reported and one incident was now the subject of an insurance claim.

The new paving slabs removed the tripping hazard whilst performing the function (by the change of surface finish and contrasting colour) of warning pedestrians of their proximity to the glazed frontage of the library building.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Owen commented that there had with problems with the windows here (Civic Centre North Block) and now the new Orpington Library without air conditioning and this costly new paving. He considered that the Council should be employing experts to give sensible advice to ensure the Council's contracts were properly executed. He asked the Portfolio Holder whether the right people were being used to manage capital works.

Reply:

Councillor Morgan responded that he suspected that the contract had gone to tender and the best people had been used. However he would look at this issue, as it was the first time it had come to his notice, to see whether it held up in terms of value for money and assessment.

9. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Chairman of the Development Control Committee

What proposals he has to ensure that developments under the Bromley Town Centre master plan are architecturally and aesthetically pleasing and enhance the public realm?

Reply:

The Chairman replied that developments would be expected to comply with the design policies of the Unitary Development Plan and Area Action Plan, in particular the Key Design Principles for each Opportunity Site set out in Appendix 5 of the Area Action Plan. Where appropriate, there would be

negotiations with promoters of schemes regarding off-site improvements to the public realm of the Town Centre, and in any event developments should provide the same quality of design and materials as the improvements being planned for Bromley North Village and elsewhere in the Town Centre. Also consideration would be given on a case by case basis to the design of proposals being reviewed by the Design Council – CABE and/or The Architecture Panel.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett asked whether the Chairman would agree that looking at Bromley High Street at this time there were some very fine buildings but in between there was a mix of buildings put up in the 1960s and 70s which were not attractive. This was now a golden opportunity to ensure that anything that was newly built would cohere with the best architecture in the High Street and was sympathetic in style. Councillor Bennett did not want what they had in Croydon which he felt was a monument to the worst of the 1970s. He asked for assurance that every building put forward to Development Control Committee and its Sub-Committees would be judged on aesthetic grounds and not just on design.

Reply:

Councillor Dean stated that he could give that assurance – design and aesthetic appearance had always been a consideration by the Development Control Committee and would continue to be the case as the Area Action Plan was introduced in Bromley.

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

What is he doing to assist the One O’Clock Club in Crystal Palace and the Orpington Gateway Club as a result of the council budget reduction to Bromley Mytime?

Reply:

Councillor Morgan responded that Council Officers from Renewal and Recreation had been meeting with Mytime staff over the last 18 months to assist Mytime in their development of new business arrangements that would potentially see the continuation of activities for children at the One O’Clock Club and for adults at the Orpington Gateway Club. The service at Crystal Palace was going to be tendered to try and identify a suitable operator to run such a service. Council Officers would continue to provide such support and advice throughout this process.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes said that it was all very well putting capital into the Pavilion Leisure Centre in Bromley but he considered that the reality was that because

of budget cuts these clubs now faced very difficult situations. For example the Orpington Gateway Club was now being expected to pay a 600% increase in their rent as well as being asked to move their weekly club night from a Friday to a Monday. He asked whether that was acceptable.

Reply:

Councillor Morgan replied that both Mytime and the Council valued the work done by the Gateway Club and were making every effort to see that they were satisfactorily accommodated. The reason that Mytime were doing this was to improve their business and what they could do with Crofton Halls. Friday evening was a prime night for their general lettings and the level of income from the Gateway Club did not meet that. However, discussions were ongoing and there was a meeting this Tuesday between Mytime and the Chairman of the Gateway Club, together with Councillor Evans and others at which it was hoped progress would be made.

11. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

Since the beginning of December, how many times (for each week) have requests to reset passwords been received?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder reported the number of password resets by week during the period requested as follows:

Week Commencing	Volume
28/11/2011	13
05/12/2011	13
12/12/2011	13
19/12/2011	10
26/12/2011	5
02/01/2012	28
09/01/2012	26
16/01/2012	9
23/01/2012	18
30/01/2012	11
06/02/2012	8

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Owen advised that he had been told by the Internal Engineer that he spent half of his time resetting passwords. He therefore wanted to know whether the Portfolio Holder believed the arrangements were for dealing with a 'real risk' and whether he could take a look at how much wasted staff time there was in over providing encryption arrangements for passwords.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur responded that the roll out of Quest, the automated password re-set system, had improved things dramatically since that time. All staff were encouraged by the Capita Help Desk to change passwords and use the new automated system. He anticipated that the investment of £10,500 for the system would prove good value for money and he suspected that when the Councillor spoke to individuals he would find that the system had greatly improved. If that should not prove to be the case then he asked Councillor Owen to let him know so that he could investigate matters further.