

MEETING

29th MARCH 2010

ORAL QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Willetts of the Leader of the Council

With regard to my email sent 10/2/2010, could Cllr Carr provide me with his home address so that I can forward on a letter from Mr Stephen Brown thanking him for his attendance at his son Rifleman James Brown's funeral?

Reply:

Councillor Carr advised that he would be pleased to provide his home address and would do so after the meeting. However, in this case he suggested that it might be more appropriate if Councillor Willetts forwarded the letter care of the Civic Centre as he had attended the funeral as part of his formal Council duties.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Willetts made a comment and the Mayor advised that it was not a question and therefore did not require a response.

2. From Councillor Fawthrop of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

What progress has been made on the electronic banking trial?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder responded that the Council did not have an electronic banking trial but made extensive use of electronic methods of banking. The Council had substantially enhanced its use of electronic payments and was now paying 75% (February 2010) of invoices through this route. As at the 31st January, 86% of the payments received in respect of Council Tax were by electronic means and the overwhelming proportion of business rates was also paid through these routes.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fawthrop asked whether there were any measures going to be taken for the Council to make electronic banking available as it would be useful for paying parking tickets directly rather than by credit card.

Reply:

Councillor Reddin agreed that electronic banking was becoming increasingly the preferred method of choice for many residents and also represented lower transactions costs for the Council so should be encouraged. He confirmed that it was something that would be looked at in the future.

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

Is the idea of a new Penge Library completely off the agenda?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder was aware that that this matter was of particular interest to the member concerned and his colleagues. He confirmed that the Council was still pursuing options around the provision of an improved library provision within the Penge area along with associated Community use. The Property Division did make an offer on the former Edgingtons furniture store which was seen as fair and reasonable in the present market. This offer had not been accepted by the current owner who it was understood was possibly pursuing other options. Officers would continue to examine the potential of any other suitable buildings which might come to the market.

Councillor Fookes indicated that he did not have a supplementary question.

4. From Councillor Getgood of the Portfolio Holder for Adult and Community Services

What consultation took place with Service users before the decision that no mental health day services provider was to provide hot meals as part of their tender for the contract, that no paid catering staff were to be included in the contract and that support staff hours are to be cut across the service.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the current contract for mental health day centres did not specify the provision of meals or the number of staff required to carry out the service and neither did the previous specification. There had therefore been no change to the specification.

In respect of meals, the contract (both previously and now) allowed the provider to make a charge for meals and/or refreshments if they chose to provide them, but it was not a requirement of the specification that they be provided.

The contracts did not stipulate the number of staff support hours to be provided as the specifications were based on outcomes for service users. It was for the provider to decide how many staff hours were required to meet the outcomes. Any changes in staff support hours were therefore decided by the provider and any reduction would be as a result of the increasing involvement of day centre users themselves in delivering peer support services.

Our normal route for consulting with service users was through the Mental Health Forum and the decision to tender the day services contract was discussed there.

Supplementary Questions:

Councillor Getgood stated that the way the contract had developed was causing concern to service users and he thought that the Portfolio Holder should be aware of this. The service was for very vulnerable adults but they felt as if they were being marginalised from this process and it was a further sign of the lack of priority given to this 'Cinderella service'. He asked the Portfolio Holder to take on board these comments and do what he could to address them.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur did not agree that resources had been reduced but rather they had been increased and the service was higher in priority. He accepted that it probably should rise further but this was a national problem and something both he and Councillor Getgood were concerned about. However, in this case he felt it was really a matter between the services users and providers. Councillor Arthur further commented that it was interesting the way the service was progressing and one of the innovative ideas being talked about was possibly creating a small business enterprise amongst the users themselves in order to use preparation of meals as part of their rehabilitation and training. However, he agreed that it was an important matter to highlight and was sure that whoever the Portfolio Holder was in the next municipal year they would work closely with the ward councillors.

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

What action has been taken to require the Build Centre in Rays Road to maintain the road and drains so that the flooding problem which affects users of West Wickham Station is alleviated?

Reply:

In agreement with the Resources Portfolio Holder, Councillor Smith responded and advised that the property referred to was Council owned, and held by Wolseley Centers Ltd on a 99 year lease originally granted by the GLC in 1979. Property Division had written to the tenant requesting that they clear the blocked gully, sweep Rays Road on a regular basis, and also install additional gullies to take away surface water during heavy rainfall. Legal advice was being sought to enforce this repairing covenant in the lease.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett was sorry to raise this question at two Council meetings in a row but since the last time there had been further flooding in Rays Road. He had a copy of the lease which made it very clear that it was the responsibility of Wolseley Centers to keep the road in repair, which it was not, neither were the gullies cleared and this was a constant source of irritation to his ward constituents. He asked how long the Council would allow what was one of the largest companies in the world to continue not carrying out its responsibilities under the terms of the lease which they had for another 70 years.

Reply:

Councillor Smith replied that in close cooperation with a colleague (Resources Portfolio Holder) the Property Division were seeking legal advice in taking this matter forward. A concern in dealing with such a major company was they had deep reserves to call on and seemed to minimise their responsibilities but Officers were trying to address this issue.

6. From Councillor Sarah Phillips of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

What happens to all the rubbish in public waste bins that contain many items that could be recycled?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder explained that to address the issue of recyclable material present in street bins being lost to landfill and incineration a recent initiative had been introduced, with colleagues in Public Protection and the Probation Service to use offenders on the community payback scheme to sort through the Kier waste, separating various recyclable materials.

An area has been created at Waldo Road where 8 offenders and a community payback supervisor work sorting through the litter bin waste. Currently two teams of offenders working Monday and Tuesdays only – although the Probation Service hoped to be able to provide teams to work for 5 days a week (Monday to Friday) from April onwards.

The operation was currently recycling 25% of the waste that was being processed. It was expected that this would increase as the quality of the waste improved and the operation developed. At the current levels of recycling, we would expect to recover 125 tonnes of recyclable material per year which would save approximately £7000 per year in disposal costs.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Phillips asked whether the Scheme might be expanded to other Depots such as Churchfields or similar schemes.

Reply:

Councillor Smith advised that it was an ambition to expand this scheme and any scheme that maximised the amount of recycling materials, a view he was sure all members would agree with.

7. From Councillor Willetts of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

Can you tell me how many people are residing/living in the Leasons Centre?
ii) why is Mr B of Chipperfield Road receiving mail items i.e. credit cards addressed to Mr C. W. Leasons Centre " 239 Chipperfield Road" ?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder said he understood that Councillor Willetts had already been advised by Officers on 18 March 2010 that there were 7 persons living within the Leasons Centre.

Regarding the second part of his question, which was rather unclear, Councillor Willetts would be aware that the post box at the Centre suffered damage from vandalism and it was possible that the post person delivered mail to the nearest property. Alternatively if mail was being addressed to a person by the name of "Mr C W Leasons Centre", then it may be that either the sender's mailing database had been corrupted, or it was being used unwittingly in connection with credit card fraud. If the latter then the police should be informed.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Willetts replied that the post box was now in full working order but again Mr B of Chipperfield Road had received further credit card statements this morning. He would pass them to the Portfolio Holder and would ask whether Councillor Reddin would seriously consider the removal of these people from the Centre. Councillor Willetts said that the Centre had become a 'doss house' and a nuisance to local residents with lights on in the canteen 24 hours a day and the dumping of household refuse on the verge outside on the wrong days as well as other problems.

Reply:

Councillor Reddin replied that certainly if the occupants of any Council owned property were causing an issue to their neighbours then investigations would be carried out and action would be taken as appropriate. He asked that the details be passed to him and he would look into it.

**8. From Councillor Fawthrop of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment
(Councillor Fawthrop had subsequently withdrawn this question.)**

How many collisions, accidents (KSI) or other equivalent have taken place on unlit roads after lighting up time in the last 6 months?

For equivalent roads that have street lighting how many collisions, accidents (KSI) or other equivalent have taken place after lighting up time in the last 6 months?

**9. From Councillor Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment
(in agreement with Councillor Smith, the Portfolio Holder for Public
Protection and Safety replied to this question)**

What progress has been made on the proposal for a gating order for the Royston Estate in Penge?

Reply:

Consultation had been completed and overwhelmingly, local residents, residents association and other statutory consultees were in support of the Gating Order proposal. Council officers had taken onboard comments about the detail of implementation, resulting in a number of alterations to the original

proposal. It was planned to implement the amended Gating Order within the next few weeks following the signing of the official order and advertisement of a public notice.

Residents affected by the Gating Order were contacted and provided with a frequently asked questions information sheet, which covered any queries that were raised. The response gathered from this exercise has again been positive and complementary.

The construction period would take an estimated two to three weeks which would be carried out during the April/May period. The Council's contractor would notify all residents directly affected by the installation of gates prior to work commencing, to ensure that residents had a point of contact and to discuss maintenance of access during works.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes expressed concern that he as a Ward Councillor had not been involved or made aware of what was happening.

10. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

What has been the reduction in the consumption of refreshments at council committees since the last Council Meeting?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that to the best of his knowledge 'none'.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett made reference to the previous Council Meeting and the amendment by the opposition (Lib/Dem) to stop the serving of 'tea and biscuits' at Committee meetings as a saving on the budget. He commented that since then they had 'devoured' tea and biscuits at every meeting and asked the Portfolio Holder whether he would agree with the view that a principle was only a principle when it involved some sort of sacrifice.

Reply:

Councillor Reddin made various asides related to refreshments but generally agreed with the comment.

11. From Councillor Willetts of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

With regard to your written reply FC para v) on 15/2/10, i) can you tell me the date Mr Mannering's slimy rotting leaf debris complaint in alleyway Batchwood Green through to Leeson's Hill (via me) was entered into the EAL Special box? ii) following a further complaint from Mr Mannering, could you remove from the same location steps, leaves, tin cans, bags of dog mess, graffiti on retaining walls & removal of overhanging privet obstruction & further, remove litter debris from the top of the banking area 83 - 89 Leeson's Hill both a little more speedily than his previous request for removal?

Reply:

i) 7th February 2010.

ii) A letter had been sent to the owner/occupier of 93 Leasons Hill asking them to cut back their overhanging vegetation. The other requests detailed above had either already or would shortly be attended to by the respective contractors.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Willetts said he was amazed at the last meeting when Councillor Smith had stated that Bromley's street cleaning record was going from strength to strength as assessed through official inspections. He considered this was clearly not the case in respect of Mr Mannering and the lack of daily clearance at Cotmandene shops. Regarding the signing of a new contract in the next few months he asked what the Portfolio Holder would be recommending.

Reply:

Councillor Smith replied that he would be recommending an excellent value for money scheme that was already producing benefits for Bromley in the top quartile of all London Boroughs for street cleaning. He believed it would drive Bromley to reach even higher still to hopefully become the best.

12. From Councillor Fawthrop of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

How many trees in total and how many trees with a tree preservation order (TPO) are due to be felled under the latest proposal from BHAL to tarmac over our Green belt and open spaces?

Reply:

Councillor Reddin explained that approximately 40 trees needed to be felled to implement the construction of an additional aircraft apron area and replacement car parking at Hangar 503 to the south west of East Camp. 21 of those trees were the subject of a Tree Preservation Order (TPO).

The TPO was a woodland Order dating from 1954 which covered an area including Cudham Lodge Woods which was within the airport boundary and included part of the construction site and woodland to the east.

The Chief Planner had advised that BHAL, as a statutory undertaker, was entitled to carry out works to protected trees, including felling them, where the trees were situated on operational land, and either the works on the land could not otherwise be carried out, or the works were for the purpose of securing safety in the operation of the undertaking.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fawthrop asked if the Portfolio Holder would agree with him that trees that had TPOs were protected for the public benefit and that when healthy trees were being felled this should be resisted vigorously.

Reply:

Councillor Reddin responded that the general principle of TPOs was clearly for the public benefit as rightly stated, but this had to be balanced against such issues as general safety which was also in the public interest. In this case the aircraft were spilling out onto the apron the main taxi bay for the airport so there was a clear safety issue which was applied to justify the works. The Council had to balance the public benefit with other issues including public safety and aircraft safety.

13. From Councillor Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People

What is being done to reduce bureaucracy in schools?

Reply:

Councillor Noad advised that the Council recognised that the bureaucracy caused by the large number of new initiatives and directives issued by the Department for Children Schools and Families, OfSTED and the various non-governmental organisations with which schools were obliged to work was causing an excessive burden on schools and a headache for head teachers.

The Children and Young People's Department in Bromley was working as closely as possible with head teachers to ensure that the Council did not add to this burden and reduced it wherever possible. The CYP Department had a system, agreed with head teachers, of electronically accessed circulars which showed clearly where important information was contained or action was required. Additionally the CYP department had a policy of only collecting information from schools where it was not already available centrally. The local authority had provided schools with advice contained in the 'teacher workforce agreement' on ways to reduce the 25 identified burdens on teachers included in agreements with DfCSF.

Councillor Noad gave one example of excessive bureaucracy currently undergoing. Last Thursday a letter had been received from OfSTED informing the Department that it was to be the subject of yet another immediate Inspection which would last for forty days. The Departments to be inspected would be Safeguarding and Looked after Children again with emphasis on social care and social workers. Both the Portfolio Holder and his Assistant would be interviewed. Interviews would take place right through the Department and staff would have to be brought in over the Bank Holiday period to comply with certain regulatory burdens placed on the authority with no notification at all. Head Teachers would need to be involved as would the Police, the PCT and other Bodies. In addition this Inspection fell right in the middle of the school holidays when all of the schools would be closed for two weeks which exacerbated the difficulties being faced. The Portfolio Holder considered that this was just one example of the insurmountable level of bureaucracy that had to be faced by the Department and placed on the Council by the current Government.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes said that his question had been prompted by recent visits to schools where the issue of communication with parents had arisen. He felt that there should be a reduction in the amount of letters sent home to parents and that email should be used far more frequently. His concern was that schools themselves did not have the capacity to communicate with parents in that way. He asked if the Portfolio Holder would assist schools to communicate better with parents by email.

Reply:

Councillor Noad replied that it was email that had opened up the 'Pandora's box' of yet more and more paper and bureaucracy engulfing the local education authority. The notification from Ofsted had come by email but with it had come a number of separate attachments (13 in total) which had to be completed and sent back to Ofsted by the Friday evening making an excessive burden on schools and officers.

Regarding communication with parents, the Portfolio Holder considered it essential that, as the service users, they understood what was going on. However, he accepted the spirit of the question and he would look into the matter.

14. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Portfolio Holder for Resources

What was the percentage increase in the Council tax for the years;

1998-2002
2002-2006
2006-2010?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that in 1998 – 2002 the cumulative increase in Council tax (Bromley element) was 37.6% which represented an 8.3% annual average increase. For 2002 – 2006 it was 23.4% which was a 5.4% annual increase; and in 2006-2010 it was a 13.7% cumulative increase, an average annual increase of 3.3%.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett asked what the Portfolio Holder deduced from these figures.

Reply:

Councillor Reddin responded that it was an interesting range of years because from 1999 – 2002, three of those years this authority had been under control of the parties opposite. During that short period the Council tax went up by 38%, the Council's reserves were halved and at the end of it the then Social Services Department had zero stars. Following that under the current administration for the most part there had been a steady reduction in Council tax. This year there had been a 'real terms' cut in Council and tax and the

Council was a debt free Borough. He felt the message was quite clear based on these facts as to which administration provided more and cost less.
