

COUNCIL MEETING

25th JUNE 2012

ORAL QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop of the Environment Portfolio Holder.

Will the Portfolio Holder join me in congratulating the department's staff and contractors for their sterling efforts in removing graffiti from Petts Wood and Knoll ward, which has now remained virtually graffiti free for over a year?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder congratulated the contractors for the improvements over the last two to three years which he felt applied not just to Petts Wood and Knoll but across all wards. He considered that this was another example of improvements coming from better organisation and planning, rather than spending more money.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fawthrop wished to put on record his thanks to Councillor Smith who had been most helpful.

2. From Councillor David Jefferys of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

In light of the March Council Motion, could the Portfolio Holder provide clarification from his discussions with the Metropolitan Police, on the police numbers allocated to Bromley from October 2012 and the Safer Neighbourhood team staffing levels for Shortlands Ward?"

Reply:

Councillor Stevens stated that he had been involved in a number of discussions with the Borough Commander but had also engaged in lobbying in partnership with the Leader. In all discussions with the Mayor's Office, he had been absolutely clear that Bromley deserved a strong Police Service and one that was adequately resourced. He stated that he had been absolutely clear that it was paramount that the residents of the borough received adequate protection and also a fair share of resources based on the amounts contributed to the central budgets for Policing in Bromley. The Borough was very large in area and needed adequate police coverage.

In relation to the situation in Shortlands ward, he confirmed that the team currently consisted of one Sergeant, one Police Constable and two Police

Community Support Officers. The Portfolio Holder advised that a meeting with the Deputy Mayor for Policing had been arranged for July, at which he would continue to make the case for Bromley. However, the situation was not expected to become clear until October.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Jefferys thanked the Portfolio Holder for his answer and asked him to keep all Ward Members informed of the outcomes of his meetings.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that he would keep ward members informed.

3. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services (in the absence of the Councillor Evans the Leader of the Council responded)

How many families are currently being housed in bed and breakfast accommodation for more than six weeks?

Reply:

The Leader stated there were none, and queried whether Councillor Fookes was referring to families in bed and breakfast with shared accommodation.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes responded that this was correct, and asked why it had taken a letter from Grant Shapps for this to be the case.

Reply:

The Leader responded that it had not.

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

In recent months various assurances have been given by the police as to the number of police officers and PCSOs employed in the Borough in the foreseeable future. It would seem that every few weeks these figures vary as to numbers and when they will come into being. Do you now have from the police, one of our major partners in the Safer Bromley Partnership, a reliable forecast on these figures and a realistic date as to when the additional numbers will finally arrive in the Borough?

Reply:

Councillor Stevens responded that, as outlined at the previous meeting of the Council, he could confirm that the new local policing model for London had

been presented to Metropolitan Police Service Management Board. Discussions were under way between the Mayor's Office and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner with regard to the implications that it would have for all boroughs in London.

Having also met with the local Borough Commander, he acknowledged that the Council must operate and continue to deliver the most effective and efficient service it could. However, it had to be noted that, until a decision was made by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, it was not possible to be definitive about the Police Officer numbers and Police Community Support Officer numbers that would be allocated to the borough. More information should be available in September, but until then the Borough Commander would not be able to make plans. Unfortunately the date had kept being put back and back and there were too many rumours going around and no one knew what the exact situation was. Councillor Stevens considered this was unacceptable and had voiced this to the Deputy Mayor stressing the need for clarity. His priority in the meantime was to work closely with the Borough Commander to ensure that the officers and staff the borough currently had were best allocated during this very challenging time with the Olympics about to take place. He was confident that the attitude and resilience of officers and staff in Bromley would allow this.

He continued that most wards were now short of PCSOs. Of the 59 who had been sent for training as Police Officers only 3 had been sent back, but there were now 24 trainees now working in the borough. This meant that the borough was still missing half of its PCSOs.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Auld asked whether the Portfolio Holder was aware that in Petts Wood and Knoll ward recently there had only been one PCSO on duty for eight hours out of twenty four.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens responded that this was not acceptable: the minimum was one PC and one PCSO, and he needed to know if ever this was not the case.

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

What plans he has to update Building a Better Bromley?

Reply:

The Leader responded that although Building a Better Bromley was several years old it still reflected the views of the residents that the Council served. He reminded Councillors that residents were consulted on the Council's priorities every year – these priorities remained consistent and he saw no need for a complete overhaul. He felt that the Building a Better Bromley report he had presented in 2004 had established a vision that had led to two election

victories. He suggested that Executive and Resources PDS Committee could give some consideration to the strategy, particularly in relation to the changing relationships with the health service and the voluntary sector and the Localism Act.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett welcomed this reply and added that with Building a Better Bromley in its eighth year it was time it was refreshed, with a greater emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, outsourcing, new technology and business units.

Reply:

The Leader responded it was important to remain effective in the eyes of residents in providing value for money and excellent service and that he was happy to include Councillor Bennett's suggestions as part of the PDS discussions.

6. From Councillor David Jefferys of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

In the light of the favourable initial comments from residents on the green waste collection service pilot, could the Portfolio Holder give a statement on the progress of the pilot scheme and on the plans he has to expand the scheme across the Borough.

Reply:

Councillor Colin Smith said that the pilot scheme was a great success, with eight thousand people paying for their garden waste to be removed, and gave credit to Councillor William Huntington-Thresher and the Waste Minimisation Working Group. The scheme was growing and there were now two full rounds – a third round would need an additional crew to be paid for.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Jefferys thanked the Portfolio Holder and said that the service was appreciated by residents and suggested that the scheme be extended as quickly as possible.

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

What are the future prospects for community Police bases in the Borough?

Reply:

Councillor Tim Stevens replied that the estate that provided accommodation for the Police in Bromley was the property of the Mayor's Office for Policing

and Crime. In line with many other areas of public expenditure a thorough review was being undertaken to identify possible cost savings. In times of economic restriction, the Metropolitan Police Service, like every other Public Sector organisation, had to review its capital expenditure and the efficient use of the estate. The decisions were operational ones and would be made by the Commissioner in consultation with the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

He stated that, as Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety, he continued to lobby hard at both local and London-wide levels to ensure that the consequences of dealing with the economic challenges would not see Bromley suffer. He resolved to continue his hard work and ensure that both the Council and partners were fully briefed when final decisions were made.

All the Safer Neighbourhood Team bases in the borough were held on long leases which would be costly to withdraw from. The first lease to end would not be until 2016. The Police would consider all the options: they had already sold Penge Police Station, and were hoping to sell Orpington, but they would not want to base all their Safer Neighbourhood Teams at Bromley Police Station.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes suggested that these moves would be the end of Safer Neighbourhood Teams, and that, bearing in mind the Total Place initiative, he asked if the Council should look at basing its own services in these ward bases to assist the Police.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens explained that this was not practical as the Police needed to have total control of its bases, and most had no access nor were open to the public. It was important that the Police continued to be based in the wards, but this was a matter for the Police rather than the Council.

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

What has been the impact of the introduction of a cap on housing benefit on Bromley residents?

Reply:

Councillor Graham Arthur stated that in April 2011 the Government introduced the following three caps to the amount of Housing Benefit that could be paid:

- (i) The five bedroom Local Housing Allowance rate was removed so that the maximum level was a four bedroom rate – in Bromley this had minimal impact as only 1 claim was affected by this restriction.

(ii) Set absolute financial caps to each Local Housing Allowance rates by bedroom size – the average Local Housing Allowances in Bromley were well below the cap levels so this change had no impact.

(iii) The Household Benefits Cap. From April 2013 a limit would be placed on the amount a working age household could receive in benefits. The “Benefits Cap” would be set at £26,000 per annum which was the average working family income after tax. The only exceptions would be those households that include a claimant receiving Disability Living Allowance, War Widow or Working Tax Credit.

The “Benefits Cap” would apply to all working age households who rented from either the private or social rented sectors. The Local Authorities would administer the Benefits Cap by restricting the amount of Housing Benefit that was paid.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had advised Bromley that 397 households may potentially be affected. The Council was currently working with the DWP to ensure that the households affected were made aware of the cap.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett asked whether the Portfolio Holder would agree that there had been many scare stories in the last few years and none had come to pass. What was proposed was a fairer system for tenants and the general taxpayer in the Borough.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur agreed and commented that it was a nonsense that some people were supported to live in high rent areas which other people in employment could not afford. There had been concerns about displacement from central London, but so far anecdotally Bexley had reported only four cases. However, any impact was more likely to be felt in Bexley and Croydon. The Portfolio Holder expressed the view that what was needed was an effective housing team such as that in Bromley that worked to prevent problems before they materialised.

9. From Councillor David Jefferys of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

Would you the Portfolio Holder provide a statement on the plans for the future use of Kingswood House and the surrounding site in Shortlands and how he will involve local residents in the decision? What has been the cumulative cost of maintaining the building and the site since its closure on the 31st March 2012 and what are the continuing weekly costs of the maintenance?

Reply:

A report had been submitted to the Resources Portfolio Holder for pre-decision scrutiny by the Executive and Resources PDS Committee on 4th April 2012 following the closure of Kingswood House. Over the past months officers had been investigating options for future use of the care home, these being the provision of a respite centre for children with special educational needs and use of the care home for temporary accommodation.

Neither of these long-term options was considered by officers to be feasible which was also the view of the Leader. In accordance with the previous decision by the Resources Portfolio Holder, therefore preparations were being made to market the property

If the property was offered for sale the bids received would be reported to the Executive and Resources PDS Committee for pre-decision scrutiny prior to a decision by the Resources Portfolio Holder. Local Ward Members would be consulted at this stage. Any redevelopment would require planning permission which would be subject to public consultation.

Following closure of the building it was necessary to employ security guards to protect it, while a guardian service sought occupants to move into it while it remained unused. The cost of the full-time security guards was £23,000. This had now ceased and the guardian service had taken over the property. The service did not charge the Council and had agreed to contribute £40 per month per occupant towards the cost of services. The Council was responsible for the cost of all services and outgoings. To date gas bills totalling £108 had been paid. Additionally, building works to improve the security of the site had cost £1,046.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Jefferys reported that he had met local residents that afternoon and they wanted to see a decision made soon before the site deteriorated any further.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder responded that he agreed that a quick decision would benefit both the residents and the Council.

10. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment

How many complaints have been received with regard to street cleaning in the Borough this year?

Reply:

Exactly 100 in the calendar year to date as at 21st June.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes commented that one of his constituents had asked whether the Council still cleaned the roads. He felt that although some areas were given occasional blitzes, other areas were ignored, and the £1m cut was now having an impact. He asked when he could expect to see improvements.

Reply:

Councillor Smith responded that the cut was as a result of the previous Government's actions in creating a financial crisis and moving funding away from outer London authorities to inner London and other parts of the country. Difficult decisions needed to be made to balance budgets and prioritise services. He did not consider it was necessary to spend extra money to achieve results. The Portfolio Holder accepted that there had been one or two blips in the change over of crews to new routes. However, complaints had not soared and generally residents were happy. There was a contingency fund that could be used for road cleaning but any decision would be 'evidence driven' and he hoped it would not need to be used.