

COUNCIL MEETING

21st JANUARY 2013

ORAL QUESTION FROM A MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC

From Mr David Clapham, Chairman Keston Village Resident's Association of Councillor Peter Dean, Chairman of the Development Control Committee

(Background information:

You will recall our correspondence in October and November 2012, in which I voiced concerns about the quality and number of staff within the Council's Planning Department. In my view, the Planning Department needs to be properly staffed as I believe this Council department is vital in creating the wealth which underpins a vibrant local economy.)

Question

I understand that the Chief Planner has now retired. Could you please outline what specific steps have been taken to bring the Planning Department, and in particular the Development Control (Majors) Team up to full strength?

Reply:

Councillor Dean responded that he was very pleased to answer the question as they both agreed that the Planning Department was crucial as Mr Clapham had said in creating a 'vibrant local economy'. He advised that in the past year Development Control have granted permissions enabling major town centre restructuring in Bromley Town Centre and quite recently in Orpington Town Centre. The Council would continue to determine decisions as both the Area Action Plan unfolded and when other major developments emerged. It was also our responsibility to ensure that the clean and green element of living in Bromley was maintained. Over 50% of Bromley land space constituted green belt land and the Council would ensure this legacy was not undermined by inappropriate development. However in order to maintain the very high standard of service provided by the Planning Department it was essential that it was properly staffed and fully equipped with the right specialists to provide what was required. Councillor Dean said that it was no secret that a number of planning staff had departed in the past 18 months or so. In the first instance it had to be recognised that with the construction industry in decline there were a reduced number of applications being considered so that there was no immediate need to fill all those vacancies particularly in Building Control. Secondly, although a few specialist staff had been lost these roles were now filled by existing staff taking advantage of new opportunities or by temporary staff on fixed term contracts. These contracted staff provided an excellent quality of service and the indications were that if

and when those positions become permanent they would be interested in tendering their applications.

Councillor Dean referred to the correspondence with Mr Clapham on this matter last year when he sent quite a comprehensive reply and expressed satisfaction with the Planning Department generally but did have some concerns about the lack of senior management available to run the Major Applications section. He agreed that this was a very important role to question further and was pleased to advise that one of the most experienced and Senior Planning Officers had recently been given responsibility for this section.

Supplementary Question:

Mr Clapham stated that he had noticed from an item on the Renewal & Recreation PDS Committee meeting last Thursday in Appendix 1 various statistics on the Planning Dept. These showed a deterioration in the percentage of applications decided in 8 weeks running from 2008-2013, both for minor and other applications. He asked - are you therefore satisfied that the Planning Department is correctly resourced to maintain and achieve the target set by the government in the turn round of applications?

Reply:

Councillor Dean replied that as he had said earlier the Planning Dept was not fully staffed at the moment but that contingencies had been made including a number of additional staff on temporary fixed term contracts. It was therefore his opinion that the Department was fully equipped to provide a service that the public would expect from the Council.