

COUNCIL MEETING

21st JANUARY 2013

ORAL QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Tony Owen of the Chairman of the Development Control Committee

How many planning enforcement cases are currently unresolved?

(Councillor Owen arrived after his question had been put and in his absence the Chairman read out his intended reply.)

Reply:

The Chairman advised that the Council's Planning Enforcement Section currently had around 400 unresolved cases concerning alleged breaches of planning control dating from 2011-2012. This compared with approximately 1500 new enforcement enquiries over the same period.

The majority of cases could be resolved following a site visit that typically lead to a number of possible resolutions, for example the development already had planning permission or a minor breach could be rectified without the need for formal action. In other cases it may be possible to rectify the breach by negotiation or where it was not expedient to take enforcement action.

The unresolved cases included those where formal enforcement action was actively being pursued, a retrospective application had been submitted or an appeal had been lodged. Over 80 notices were issued in 2012, the majority being subject to appeal.

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

Pursuant to my question to the Chairman of the GP&L Committee at the Council Meeting on 26th March 2012 which revealed that the taxpayer was providing assistance to the value of £64,000 to staff for trades union and related activities what action is being taken to recoup this expenditure from the trades unions?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the figure in the question covered the corporate trade union and staff side activities. The latter had been introduced locally by the Council many years ago to support staff engagement and participation in organisational improvement and change programmes. However, the staff representation structure was not immune from change and

it would be reviewed in the next financial year to reflect the pressures and structural changes in the organisation. Staff and their representatives and other key internal stakeholders would be consulted at the appropriate time.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bennett asked if the PH would ensure that the concerns of the general public and of members that the Council was paying out for trade union activity from the Council Tax payers' purse when this ought to be provided by the Trade Unions was taken into account and there would be a speedy resolution in the next year.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur advised that the Council had a legal obligation to support Trade Union activities where they are recognised in the work place. However, going forward into next year as we move to Local Pay and Conditions and change the organisational structural of the Council it would be appropriate as part of that reorganisation to look at the way trade union activities were funded. The Portfolio Holder also said that he had taken note of this and the concern that the level of funding in that area may well be of concern to local taxpayers who might expect the Council to do something about it.

3. From Councillor David McBride of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

What effect does he think the closure of the Police offices in Orpington and Biggin Hill Airport will have to the safety of residents and businesses in those areas?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder thanked Councillor McBride for his question and explained that the reason why the front desk in Orpington Police station was closing was because the Police station was being sold off. The only Police presence currently at the Police Station was the Orpington Safer Neighbourhood Team and they were temporally moving to the Pettswood base whilst alternative arrangements were put into place. The Police were currently consulting on possible locations for proposed public access points in Orpington and were negotiating with both the Council and Local businesses.

As far as Biggin Hill was concerned Bromley Police had no presence or office at the Airport. There was however a Safer Neighbourhood base at Main Road Biggin Hill housing both the Biggin Hill and Darwin teams. The front counter of this office was staffed by volunteers and had a low footfall. The intention was to have a public access point at the Biggin Hill Library which would be supported by both volunteers and the local police team which would provide an enhanced service to local residents.

In conclusion Councillor Stevens advised that these changes would have no negative effect on residents and business alike and would actually have a positive effect with an increased Police presence in both Biggin Hill and Orpington.

Supplementary question:

Councillor McBride asked leave of the Mayor to first of all ask the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Colin Smith, to pass on to Council staff congratulations for the very good work they had done during the bad weather in the last few days. Not only clearing main roads and foot ways but also the information that had been made available to the public which he felt had been much improved this year than previously.

His supplementary question was on the Mayor of London's Policing Plan and he asked if the Portfolio Holder would agree that it was a real worry for communities that it was proposed to have only 1 dedicated Police Constable and 1 dedicated PCSO in each ward. This would result in a waste of local knowledge in the Police Teams and loss of community engagement and he asked if Councillor Stevens would pass on those concerns to the Mayor of London in the consultation meetings.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens agreed that it was a concern both to him and the Leader of the Council and that this matter had been raised with the Deputy Mayor at recent meetings. He confirmed that Councillor McBride was correct in his comments and that under the proposed new Policing model there would be 1 Police Constable and 1 PCSO dedicated per ward whilst the remainder of the team would be merged into a Sector Team who would be expected to patrol the rest of that Sector. Bromley was currently divided into 4 Sectors, 2 with 6 teams and 2 with 5 teams. The Portfolio Holder was also concerned that unless Bromley got the police numbers that were originally stated, but that this now looked unlikely, then the Borough Commander would struggle to even put out Sector Teams. He confirmed that he viewed this very seriously and had raised these concerns and would continue to do so with the Deputy Mayor for Policing to ensure Bromley had its proper share of police resources. He considered that it was vital to keep the local police teams in place as to date they had done such a good job.

Further Supplementary Question:

Councillor Getgood asked a further supplementary question of the Portfolio Holder as to his reaction to the broken promises and pledges by the Mayor. He stated that the number of police promised fell short of what the Mayor had said during his campaign and his previous Mayoralty and asked what representations the Portfolio Holder would be making on those grounds.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens did not accept that the Mayor or Deputy Mayor for policing had broken their promises. Both the Deputy Mayor and Assistant Commissioner would be attending a meeting in Bromley next Monday evening to explain their plans when we would see what they had to say. Councillor Stevens commented that the situation had been brought about by the previous government's shambolic handling of the economy resulting now in deep cuts having to be made.

4. From Councillor John Ince of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

Would the Portfolio Holder confirm that, following persistent requests from ward members and the Safer Neighbourhood Panel, that CCTV will be installed and in operation at the Cotmandene Crescent / Chipperfield Road car park in order to address the problem of persistent fly-tipping by anti social elements at this location?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder stated that he was delighted to announce that a report was going to tomorrow night's Public Protection and Safety PDS Committee with a recommendation, which he intended to accept, that two cameras be placed in Cotmandene Crescent at the same location as the previous cameras that were part of the old Cray CCTV camera scheme that had been decommissioned for some time.

The reason the cameras were being installed was as a result of requests from the Ward Councillors and their excellent work, together with the Safer Neighbourhood Panel, in respect of the persistent fly tipping and anti social behaviour in the Cotmandene Crescent area.

The Portfolio Holder thanked Councillor Colin Smith who had arranged for the Street Services division to repeatedly clean up the fly tipped rubbish. He said positive action was being taken by installing these cameras and sending out the message that if you fly tip or cause anti social behaviour you would be prosecuted.

The Portfolio Holder was sure that Councillor Ince and his ward colleagues would welcome this excellent news along with their Safer Neighbourhood Panel and local residents associations all of whom had worked so hard for the reinstatement of these CCTV cameras.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Ince thanked the Portfolio Holder and went on to ask if he could also assure Ward members that the CCTV cameras would be consistently

monitored and that appropriate action would be taken against any incidents of fly tipping and fly tippers.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens confirmed that the new cameras would be part of the system monitored here at the Civic Centre Control Room and if anyone was seen fly tipping or behaving in an inappropriate manner then action would be taken against them.

5. From Councillor Peter Fortune of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

Would the Portfolio Holder reassure me, and the residents of Cray Valley East, that we can expect to see continued investment in the regeneration of the ward with the instillation of CCTV cameras on Star Lane. Would the Portfolio Holder also recognise the efforts made by the newly formed Star Lane Residents Association in being a part of this process and join me in congratulating them for the proactive manner in which they are tackling the challenges in the area.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder was also pleased to announce as mentioned in his reply to the previous question that at the Public Protection & Safety PDS Committee meeting tomorrow the report would also contain a recommendation, which he intended to accept, for one static CCTV camera to be placed at the lower end of Star Lane near to the High Street. This would combat the problems of antisocial behaviour and fly tipping and also send out a clear message that if people continued to behave in this way the Council and Police would now prosecute them.

Councillor Stevens also paid tribute to the three Ward Councillors who had put aside political differences to campaign for CCTV for their residents. The announcement tonight was intended to build on the good work of the Council and its Partners following the recent Star Lane and Riverbirds estate clean up when 20 plus tons of rubbish, a record amount, had been taken away. This initiative came about when the newly formed Star Lane Residents Association, backed by Ward Councillors, demanded action to sort out the problems of fly tipping, anti social behaviour, dumped vehicles and graffiti. It had proved a huge success and sent out a clear message that the Council and its Partners would not tolerate that sort of behaviour any more.

The Portfolio Holder also congratulated the Star Lane Residents Association on what they had achieved so far. He went on to confirm that they would have the continued support of the Council and their local Ward Members as they continued to build on their excellent good work and moved forward making Star Lane a better place for all.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fortune thanked the Portfolio Holder for that information and said that his supplementary was the same as Councillor Ince and would ask for the same assurances for his ward.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens signified that this would be the case.

6. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

What action is he taking to ensure that the former Oakfield Rd Clinic in Penge is replaced?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder said that he was aware that this was a matter of concern for residents in the area but he could not ensure anything in this context as it was a Health matter for decision by the PCT and soon to be the CCG. However, the Council worked closely with its partners and he had managed to find out some information. The Penge Clinic was currently closed, however a business case had been approved by Bromley PCT and NHS SE London for the development of the Penge Clinic site into a new facility accommodating the two local practices (Park Practice and Oakfield Surgery) with some community space to the CCG. Services which had been provided by Bromley Healthcare from the clinic were now provided in other locations, such as the Beckenham Beacon.

The business case for the development of the site has been sent to NHS London for final approval, and they had sought further clarification around the business case, particularly in relation to the impact of the Trust Special Administrator's recommendations, to which the PCT is currently responding. They felt sure that they would have a positive response to this. As soon as final approval had been granted, the development would have no further bar to proceed, except for planning.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fookes welcomed the comments from the Portfolio Holder and asked if he knew how much this would cost. He also noted that later on the agenda there was an item on PCT funding and wondered whether some of that money could be used to pay for this facility.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder said that he could not comment on figures at the moment. When the clinic was up and running he thought there would be a case for looking at the cost of it. At it was a matter for the PCT (or CCG in April) he could not help any further.

7. From Councillor John Getgood of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

The first food bank in Penge since the World War 2 is now supporting hard pressed families in Penge. What implication does the Portfolio Holder draw from this in respect of Government economic and welfare policies.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that he was sure that everyone recognised the extreme difficulties facing some individuals and families in these difficult times. Equally he was sure everyone here applauded the actions of organisations and individuals carrying out caring work such as operating a food bank. All over the borough we are grateful for these public spirited interventions which in their different guises had always been a feature of Bromley.

The implications that Councillor Evans could draw from Councillor Getgood's reference to government policy were somewhat different to what Councillor Getgood's might be. However, on welfare the Portfolio Holder applauded the Government's aims i) in to ensure that people were not better off being unemployed rather than in work; and ii) that support and assistance was focussed on those most in need. Councillor Evans accepted that it was a blunt instrument that they were using and he did not always agree with everything but it was one that had to be used in correcting all the muddled thinking about welfare by the last government. Locally Councillor Evans stated that all he could say was that all of his officers - in social care, housing etc- were doing their very best to cope with the pressure and help vulnerable groups to weather this storm that we were all facing.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Getgood asked the Portfolio Holder to consider the effect of those policies on children. More than 1 in 4 children in the 4th richest country in the world were now living in poverty and even in Bromley 15% of children lived in poverty. He referred to the Prime Minister's statement that ending child poverty was central to improving child wellbeing but under government policies there would be 300,000 more children living in poverty by 2015/16. The recently announced changes to child tax credit would also mean that there would be a further 100,000 children living in poverty next year. He asked the Portfolio Holder to join in condemning the government's awful record in defending the wellbeing of children in Bromley and elsewhere.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder said the answer was no. He felt that the government was working under very difficult economic conditions and were doing their best for children in the UK and Bromley was also doing its best to make sure our children were looked after.

8. From Councillor Pauline Tunnicliffe of the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Safety

It is fantastic news to hear that Orpington is to have an extra fire engine in the recent statement by the London Fire Brigade. Also that the fire station in Biggin Hill will not be closing.

Would the Portfolio Holder like to comment on this and the efforts by our Borough Commander Andy Holcombe in achieving such an excellent outcome?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that the recommendation released last week by the London Fire Brigade was good news for Bromley. As Members were aware the original proposal was that one Fire engine would be lost from Bromley and that the Biggin Hill fire station would close. Now not only does this Borough get an extra fire engine at Orpington but the threat of closure had been removed from Biggin Hill. Councillor Stevens thanked the Biggin Hill ward members who had campaigned hard to keep their fire station open; their persistence had clearly paid off. He also thanked the Leader of the Council who had made known his feelings behind the scenes and together their joint efforts had had the desired effect.

The Portfolio Holder also thanked Bromley's Fire Brigade Borough Commander, Andy Holcombe, who he knew had done a lot of work on our behalf behind the scenes by pointing out the size of our Borough. Councillor Stevens felt it was pleasing to think that through our Assembly Member, James Cleverly, Bromley's views had been listened to, the only emergency service so far to do so. He commented on the extremely good news that Orpington was to get another fire engine but added a word of caution that with Downham Fire Station closing Bromley and Beckenham would now have to cover that area. In the circumstances members would be watching developments very closely.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Tunnicliffe asked if the Portfolio Holder would like to comment on the plans to build a new Fire Station in Orpington.

Reply:

Councillor Stevens commented that the new Fire Station was being built under PFI and referred to the problems with this in relation to the Hospital Trust. However he felt it was a good news story as the current Fire Station was not the right size, was outdated and needed knocking down and replaced. The planning application was due to go before the Plans Sub-Committee this week and he hoped it would be approved. He looked forward to a new purpose built fire station which would have community rooms in it for use by the public and house the second fire engine which he welcomed.

Further Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fawthrop asked if the Portfolio Holder would condemn the behaviour of the Labour and Lib/Dem members on the London Fire Brigade Board in that they had refused to go out to consultation on these plans and that they had put forward no alternative to the Plans themselves. He considered they were playing politics with the situation and proving themselves unworthy of governing.

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that he agreed with most of the comments in that this should not be a matter for playing politics with. Recommendations had come through and our Assembly Member, Mr Cleverly, as Chairman of the Board, had had to take some very tough decisions. The formal announcements were made by the Fire Brigade Commissioner. However, Councillor Stevens felt that there had been an appalling lack of consultation which had been pointed out to Mr Cleverly. The Portfolio Holder also commented that he considered that it had been handled very badly from all sides. Rather than playing politics the focus should be on what was best for the residents of London.

9. From Councillor Katherine Bance MBE of the Portfolio Holder for Education

Is there a published process on what happens to a school once they have been deemed as needing special measures by OFSTED?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that there were very specific measures set out by the Secretary of State in respect of a school deemed by OfSTED to require special measures. Under the Education Act 2011 there were quite well defined measures, many of which were powers for the Secretary of State specifically. Section 44 outlined powers in relation to underperforming schools and increased the range of circumstances in which the Secretary of State could direct that a maintained school be 'discontinued', and replaced by an academy. This included when a school had failed to meet performance standards or safety warning notices, and when a school had been identified as requiring significant improvement. There was a Website for the various sections which he would give details of after the meeting (see below).

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/section/44/enacted>

Councillor Wells then referred to Section 56 of the Education Act 2011 that outlined the process by which consultation must take place when a school was to become an academy. The consultation may be carried out by the school's governing body or a person with whom the Secretary of State proposes to enter into Academy arrangements with in respect of the school or an educational institution that replaced it. The Secretary of State had specific

reserve powers to direct the school to obtain academy status under a specific sponsor. It should be noted that the authority had no say in this matter. The following is the web address:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/section/56/enacted>

With regard to Ofsted monitoring inspections of schools subject to special measures again there was a specific web address which outlined the process (see below).

<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/monitoring-inspections-of-schools-are-subject-special-measures-september-2012>

With regard to the local authority's process of intervention and support in Bromley schools at risk of requiring special measures, this process is outlined in the revised categorisation policy currently being considered by the Education PDS Committee which will be meeting this coming Wednesday. The following is the website to view the report:

<http://cds.bromley.gov.uk/documents/s50006479/ED13019%20Categorisation%20Intervention%20and.pdf>

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Bance asked if the Portfolio Holder would agree that this should be a transparent process in which the head teachers, parents and governing bodies should be allowed to choose from a range of approved providers.

Reply:

Councillor Wells replied that the Secretary of State had very specific powers as he had already indicated in his earlier response. The process to be carried out once a school was deemed to require special measures was also very specific as outlined earlier. The process he felt was not overly transparent particularly in regard to the decision made by a Secretary of State to specify the sponsor to be involved with a school. The Secretary of State had reserve powers to define which sponsor would be responsible for an academy and an academy's conversion and he was aware that this had been the case in one particular school in this Borough.

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

What representations he has made to the Mayor of London regarding the extension of the Docklands Light Railway from Lewisham to Bromley North since the Mayoral election in May 2012 and what response has he received?

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder replied that before the Mayoral elections and as a result of the Council's constant lobbying we had obtained a promise in the Mayor's electoral literature. Subsequently, on numerous occasions we have made it abundantly clear that this administration's key transport infrastructure priority was to attract the DLR in some form into Bromley North and ideally Bromley South. Progress had not always been as swift as we would have liked, despite the many conversations and emails. It resulted in July 2012 in the Managing Director of TfL visiting the Council when Bromley's views were reiterated once again as well as emphasising the need to move things on more quickly. We also asked to see TfL's business case as we had concerns that perhaps their priorities lay elsewhere and we wanted to match up our business case to ensure we were not sidelined. However, it took several months before the figures arrived and when they did they were incomplete and did not make proper business sense. In view of that and the Leader's intervention we subsequently had a meeting in December with the local Bromley/Chislehurst MP, our GLA Member, the Leader, the Director of Renewal & Recreation and crucially the Mayor's Advisor for Transport together with a senior officer from TfL. As a result of that meeting the Portfolio Holder was pleased to announce that a way forward had been agreed and he hoped to be able to release a document in a few weeks setting out how we arrive at the Business case which should be finalised by June. It will involve very close working with Lewisham as we have a joint need to ensure that we have a robust business case. The Leader has already been in touch with the Mayor of Lewisham and both Bromley and Lewisham are in full agreement of the need to get the business case substantiated. The main aim was to get the DLR down to Bromley but Councillor Smith said that it was unlikely to occur this side of 2020 but unless things were put in place now it would never happen.

Supplementary Question

Councillor Bennett thanked the Portfolio Holder and the Leader for the action they were taking. He welcomed the fact that it was now in the draft business plan issued on 9th December. He asked if the Portfolio Holder would make it clear to the Mayor that it was not just about the routing and the number of passengers but also the economic impact it would have on the Borough and particularly on the North Bromley area in terms of regeneration. All these issues needed to be taken account in the business case.

Reply:

Councillor Smith responded that he would be very glad to. He commented that the following question referred to Bromley Town Centre, and emphasised that getting the DLR in was absolutely crucial to those aims. The Portfolio Holder was grateful for the assistance offered by the former Leader of the Liberal Democratic Party to help work with us to make that happen.

Further Supplementary Question:

Councillor Getgood asked on the subject of transport into Bromley whether the Portfolio Holder had seen a recent reference in the local newspaper about extending the Tramway and sought clarification on the possible plans for extending the Tramway from Beckenham to Bromley and whether he also supported that plan.

(On a point of order the Chairman of the Constitution Working Group advised that when the new arrangement for allowing a second supplementary question by any member had been introduced it was on the basis that it had to be about the original question. Councillor Bennett's question was originally on the DLR not Tramlink. In response to the Mayor – the Portfolio Holder indicated that he was agreeable to answering the question.)

Reply:

The Portfolio Holder advised that there was clearly a case that could be made for extending the Tramlink to Bromley and he hoped that in time it would happen. He considered that there were 3 key infrastructure priorities and to put them in order would place the DLR first as it would benefit most Bromley residents. This was closely followed by the extension up to Crystal Palace. How that would join up with the Tramlink in through whatever route into Bromley from Beckenham was also of importance to the administration as it would help the infrastructure and transport around the Borough. However, as the DLR was unlikely to happen before 2020 he felt the other 2 schemes were likely to be even further off into the future.

(The Mayor advised that the time period for questions had expired and those remaining questions would receive written answers.)

11. From Councillor David McBride of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation

What steps is he taking with the GLA to ensure Bromley continues its high status in terms of office accommodation provision and in ensuring the DLR comes to Bromley?

Reply:

Councillor Morgan advised of the following response:

To ensure Bromley continues its high status in terms of office accommodation, the Council is examining, through the current Local Plan review, options for the expansion and intensification of office use in the Town Centre around Bromley South and Bromley North stations. Options being

considered include the expansion of the office zone around Bromley South and the identification of specific office redevelopment sites.

To tackle the problem of poor quality stock, discussions are under way with officials from the GLA around the possible use of the Mayoral Growth fund to offer financial incentives to generate redevelopment/refurbishment activity.

My colleague Councillor Colin Smith has given a very full reply to that part of the question which relates to the possible DLR extension to Bromley North.

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

Why is Bromley the only London Borough not to have a capability procedure for staff in place?

Reply:

Councillor Arthur advised of the following response:

We have. Bromley Council's process for poor performance is set out in the Disciplinary Procedure. In effect the procedure covers work conduct and performance. It states inter alia that "the Council's disciplinary procedure is to cover those cases where an employee's work conduct and performance is so significantly below the required standards that formal disciplinary action is judged necessary. It does not cover the normal day to day supervision where a line manager may have to counsel, train or otherwise discuss with an employee instances of poor performance. As part of normal supervision, a line manager may have to give an oral caution to an employee: this does not form part of the formal disciplinary procedure."

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

What proposals does he have to ensure that public health will be subject to proper scrutiny and democratic oversight when the services transfer to council control?

Reply:

Councillor Carr advised of the following response:

Firstly I would say that in accordance with the recommendation of the Constitution Improvement Working Party there will be a majority of elected Councillors on the Health and Well-being Board.

There will be appropriate lead Member responsibility and of course it goes without saying appropriate scrutiny, and on these issues both the Director of Resources and indeed myself will be consulting colleagues before the Director will bring proposals to members which we believe will be fit for

purpose when the Board ceases to be a “shadow board” in the New Municipal Year.

14. From Councillor David McBride of the Portfolio Holder for Education

What support does he envisage giving to schools to ensure that no child leaves primary school unable to read and write English and without a good competence in basic maths?

Reply:

Councillor Wells advised of the following response:

This largely now is a matter for individual schools and governing bodies and we hold schools to account through a variety of means, including analysis of school data, school reviews and professional discussions with senior school leaders where there are issues.

Councillor McBride will also be aware from his own professional role that schools are being asked, and indeed funded specifically and directly with central government funds and grants, to address shortcomings in their own training programs’ professional development and specific pupil support and school improvement programs. This then sees schools buying in the specific support they themselves are aware they and their pupils need, through specific providers, the National College, Teaching Schools or other schools locally or in a ‘cluster’ such as the Diocese.

This then is very much a school led approach, good head-teachers and SMT, and through them Governing Bodies, know well their own pupils and their needs to address these sorts of issues. However with any school causing significant concern because of teaching quality, Bromley will ensure ongoing improvements in English and mathematics through additional support from specialist subject advisers. Support services from the authority will in future be targeted at schools causing significant or specific concern in their subject areas in particular.

15. From Councillor Peter Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Care Services

What is the point of refusing people access to the Housing Register and the ability to bid for properties on the Homeseeker website?

Reply:

Councillor Evans advised of the following response:

The legislation pertaining to housing allocations sets out a broad framework around who qualifies for inclusion on a local authority’s housing register and those groups who must be given reasonable preference within any allocations

scheme. Within this framework every local authority must have a published scheme which sets out the criteria for inclusion onto the housing register and how it will prioritise applications and allocate social housing stock within its area.

The number of applicants to the housing register has risen dramatically, particularly since the onset of the recession, with the number of social rented properties becoming available for letting each year continuing to fall. At its peak there were more than 8,000 households on the housing register, with less than 650 properties to which the council had nomination rights becoming available for letting over a 12 month period. This meant that only around 8% of applicants were gaining a move via Bromley Homeseekers and those who were successful had to wait for many years to secure suitable accommodation. Put simply, for the majority of applicants whilst they were assessed and placed onto the housing register giving them the expectation that they may be successful in gaining a move via Bromley Homeseekers, in reality they were unlikely to ever successfully secure accommodation via this route.

This was one of the key drivers in the decision to undertake a full review of the allocations scheme. It was recognised that practices must change in order to best meet the needs of those with a high level of housing need in Bromley as well as making best use of the resources available to us.

Following extensive consultation, it was agreed that it was important to only include those people onto the housing register if it offered them a reasonable chance to secure accommodation. Therefore, as we are unable to assist everyone that approaches us for assistance, in order to manage expectations as to what the Council can reasonably be in a position to offer in respect of housing assistance, it was clear that we had to increase the threshold for inclusion onto the housing register. In doing so the link between the housing register and housing advice and options has been strengthened to provide greater advice about alternative housing options that applicants can pursue in order to resolve their current housing situation, either by enabling them to remain in situ or by securing alternative housing.

The new allocations scheme, which was also updated to reflect the most current legislative changes and case law guidance, was approved in 2011, with a phased roll out leading to full launch and re-registration of all applicants in December 2011.

This has significantly reduced the overall number of applicants on the housing register (currently 2,226) more closely aligned to the available supply of accommodation. Applicants who do not meet the threshold for inclusion are provided with advice and guidance regarding alternative options they may wish to pursue.