

**COUNCIL MEETING**

**24<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2014**

**QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

**(1) From Margot Rohan to the Chairman of Development Control Committee**

What legitimate reason does Bromley Council's Planning department have for denying residents (particularly those with disabilities and no internet access) their democratic right to speak in objection to planning applications, by not advising objectors of the committee date, when a simple emailmerge/texting system would not have significant 'resource implications'?

**Reply:**

The Council meets its duties on publicising agenda for its committee meetings in particular by publishing agenda at least five working days in advance.

We do appreciate that some interested parties may not have access to the internet, and the notes accompanying our standard planning neighbour notification letters advise that if you have a disability or are housebound, or need an interpreter, and find it difficult to view or understand the plans, then please let us know and we will do our best to help. It is also explained in the same notes that due to the volume of correspondence we receive, the Council is unable to inform any parties of planning meeting or decision dates, however you can track applications by using our website, or you can call or email us to check if a meeting date has been scheduled.

We don't agree that we are denying residents any democratic right to speak in objection to planning applications as there are a number of ways to receive information about the progress of an application. We are not proposing to adopt any other notification system at this time.

**Supplementary Question:**

Where are meeting agendas published other than on the website?

**Reply:**

I believe that meeting agendas are available in the libraries.

**(2) From Ian Dunn to the Leader of the Council**

The budget and Council Tax papers which have been considered by the Executive this year show a budget gap of £32 million in 2016/17, increasing to £52 million in 2017/18. What plans are the Executive developing to deal with this gap?

**Reply:**

While recognising that this is a significant challenge which will transform the way the Council works, I can advise Mr Dunn that the Administration is considering a whole range of options to deal with this funding position.

We are continually seeking service efficiencies, including shared services with other boroughs, reducing back office costs, working more closely with health resulting in potential pooled budgets, ensuring our assets work better for us, considering where appropriate further outsourcing, supporting and investing in business to increase our business rate receipts, and a series of baseline reviews to name but a few. I am very happy to meet with Mr Dunn or any other resident with a particular interest in these matters to discuss these things further.

**Supplementary Question:**

In three month's time the people of Bromley will be electing councillors for a four year term – do you agree that they have a right to know what is being planned before the election rather than having a nasty surprise afterwards?

**Reply:**

In broad terms, I agree, and the Council has been open about the challenges we face. We don't do gimmicks, we do long-term sustainable planning. As soon as plans are in place we will present them to the public. We are not going to avoid a discussion in public.

**(3) From Susan Sulis, Secretary, Community Care Protection Group, to the Chairman of General Purposes and Licensing Committee (Question put by Paul Summers on behalf of Mrs Sulis)****MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES, EXPENSES AND PENSIONS.**

A report to this meeting recommends a 2014/15 Members' Allowances Scheme (including Mayoral and Deputy Mayoral Allowances) totalling £1,156,900.

- (a) For 2013/14, what was the total cost of:-
  - (i) Members' Expenses?
  - (ii) Members' Pensions?
  
- (b) For 2014/15, What is the budget allocation for:-
  - (i) Members' Expenses?
  - (ii) Members' Pensions?

**Reply:**

In addition to allowances, Members can also claim to be reimbursed for other expenses such as for travel and subsistence incurred whilst on official duties outside the borough.

We have not finished 2013/14 yet, but the estimated expenditure on these expenses in 2013/14 is £200 and the 2014/15 budget is £500.

The cost of Members' pensions (which we take to mean employer's contributions) in 2013/14 is £83,000 and in 2014/15 budget is £86,000.

**(4) From Susan Sulis, Secretary, Community Care Protection Group, to the Care Services Portfolio Holder (Question put by Paul Summers on behalf of Mrs Sulis)**

BROMLEY'S FOODBANKS & THE COUNCIL'S "HEALTHY BROMLEY" STRATEGY.

- (a) Does this Council recognise the vital contribution of Foodbank Volunteers; the Trussell Trust and local Churches to their "Healthy Bromley" Strategy by alleviating hunger and malnutrition in Bromley?
- (b) Why does the Council not record the number of Bromley referrals, or obtain this information from the foodbanks?

**Reply:**

The Council does recognise the work of the various organisations running foodbanks - there is a motion later on the agenda when I will speak at greater length on that.

As far as recording the number of Bromley referrals is concerned, we have no statutory duty to collect such information (on referrals and usage of food banks) and we try to cut down the amount of statistics that we have to provide.

**Supplementary Question:**

Mr Summers commented that this gave the impression that the council does not care.

**(5) From Susan Sulis, Secretary, Community Care Protection Group, to the Care Services Portfolio Holder (Question put by Paul Summers on behalf of Mrs Sulis)**

RESEARCH BY THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND MEMBERS OF THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING BOARD ON HUNGER; UNDERNOURISHMENT AND MALNUTRITION IN BROMLEY.

- (a) Why has scrutiny of the decision by the Resources Portfolio Holder to charge the Orpington Foodbank a commercial rent of over £8,000 p.a. been taken in private?
- (b) When will a full report on the implications of disease-related malnutrition and undernourishment in Bromley be considered by the relevant Council Committees/Boards?

**Reply:**

The report to the Resource Portfolio Holder concerned the financial/business affairs of the Council relating to commercial property transactions, which the Council is entitled to keep private to protect its own interests. Later in the agenda we will be talking in detail about the rent to be paid by the Foodbank.

There are currently no plans to conduct a review of disease-related malnutrition and undernourishment. There is currently no routine data collection relating to this issue. As a member of the Health and Wellbeing Board I am aware that the chairman of the Board Councillor Peter Fortune is very keen to take up any issues raised by the Director of Public Health.

**Supplementary Question:**

Mr Summers commented that the Church of England and the Catholic Church had recently made reference to the safety net being shredded and as an atheist he was with the vicars on this.

**(6) From Kathy Smith, Bromley LG Unite Branch Secretary to the Leader of the Council**

Staff representatives have been given assurances from the Leader, Chief Executive and Deputy, that the Commissioning Group would engage with them and have an open and transparent process. This has spectacularly failed to happen, what message does this send to staff about the commissioning process?

**Reply:**

I would take slightly exception to the phrase “spectacularly failed” but do concur that we did commit to open and transparent negotiations with all those concerned. I can point to areas such as the Customer Service Centre where I consider there was excellent communication and consultation. If that is not happening now, I apologise. The Chief Executive and the lead officer on Commissioning are here and I will ensure that that process is undertaken.

**Supplementary Question:**

Do you know that the staff call the Commissioning Board the Kremlin, the Politbureau would have had better secrecy than the Commissioning Board; other than on the Customer Service Centre, we have had no meetings despite being in a meeting over over a year ago when the Chief Executive told Marc Hume to arrange a meeting - since then we have had one meeting where Marc Hume did not attend. It has not happened up until now, the fear is that this is waiting until after the election.

**Reply:**

I did not know, I apologise for any breakdown in communication and I will do my best to make it happen in future.

**(7) From Kathy Smith, Bromley LG Unite Branch Secretary to the Leader of the Council**

The budget proposals mean cuts to the Library Service £300k , Youth Service Provision, £370k and Public Health functions £500k.

Do ward Councillors believe that democracy is served if they vote on cuts without information on the consequences that these cuts would have for the services the Council provides.

**Reply:**

I cannot speak for all ward councillors, but all Members have the opportunity to challenge myself and the Executive, and occasionally they do, but there has been no such challenge since these proposal have been made public. There is an alternative route through the Scrutiny Committees where all members are able to put their points. These cuts, whilst looking significant, will have little impact on the way we deliver services in future.

**Supplementary Question:**

Do you know that the lead officer for Libraries is informing library staff to expect at the beginning of April information about drastic reductions in hours in the Library service.

**Reply:**

I did not know that, and I do not think that it is the case. This demonstrates the point from earlier question about us not hiding things. Of course we need to take people with us. I refer to staff later on in how they are vital part of Building Better Bromley. It is right that you are asking to be communicated with and right that we should do so, but it is also right that we have a considered, thoughtful policy around budgets, dealing with the impact on local people. There has to be some discretion and confidentiality while policy is being drawn up but we take staff with us and we go to the electorate and ask us to support us and the decisions we take.

**(8) From Kathy Smith, Bromley LG Unite Branch Secretary to the Resources Portfolio Holder**

Do Councillors think it is fair, after years of pay freezes and a sub inflation pay award last year, to once again offer to hard working staff, another sub inflation pay award this year?

**Reply:**

One of the merits of adopting a local pay arrangement is that locally elected Councillors can determine staff pay increases recognising the impact of other cost pressures on the level of Council tax and the overall net budget for the financial year. Given the unprecedented financial context requiring the Council to find £60m by 2017/18 (having already achieved over £57m since 2011/12), the 2014/15 pay increase proposal including 1.7% increase for staff earning less than £21k per annum and 1.2% for staff earning £21k or more but less than £44k per annum, is a fair and affordable position for the Council. If the

proposal is agreed tonight it means that Bromley staff (apart from about 180 Management Grade Staff) will receive a pay increase higher than the 1% central government public sector pay increase cap. More importantly, it also means that Bromley staff will once again receive a higher pay increase (and on time) than their local government colleagues. The latest from the national collective pay review process between the unions and local government employers strongly indicates that the latter will offer no more than 1% across the board and any settlement is unlikely soon. Nothing unusual in that respect which is why we decided to adopt a localised terms and conditions framework, ensuring that pay decisions are taken locally by democratically elected Councillors in a timely and affordable manner.

**Supplementary Question:**

You have come out of national terms and conditions and cannot hide behind them anymore. Do you think it is fair that we are now £127 per month worse off now than in 2008, with food prices going up 30% and food prices going up 6% this year; do you think it is about time that some politician should decide to pay people the right amount of money and if we cannot afford it we will find the money? I'll swap my 1.7% increase with the Chief Officers' 1%.

**Reply:**

You are comparing loss of buying power of the salary since 2008, but that happened under the old national scheme. During the last year, people working for this borough earning under £21k received a 1.7% increase as against 1% nationally, a £200 one-off payment and this year they will receive a further 1.7% against 1% nationally. They can also obtain merit payments. This also enables local people to have self-determination rather than have pay decisions made by faceless people many miles away.