

COUNCIL MEETING

14th April 2014

ORAL QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

1. From Councillor Simon Fawthrop to the Resources Portfolio Holder

Is the Portfolio Holder aware of any discussions regarding assigning the Biggin Hill Airport lease under paragraph 5.8.4 of the agreement dated 6th May 1994?

Reply:

No.

Supplementary Question:

Will he assure me that he will be vigilant in watching out for any movement on this – the residents seem to know more about dealings going on behind the scenes and I would not want Councillor Arthur to be embarrassed by anything that might materialise.

Reply:

I am indebted to Councillor Fawthrop for his concern about my embarrassment . I am certainly not aware of any discussions of the type he has mentioned. I will keep it on my radar, and if he hears anything perhaps he would acquaint me with that.

2. From Councillor Tom Papworth to the Environment Portfolio Holder

- How many complaints were received by Bromley regarding potholes in 2013?
- How much did the London Borough of Bromley spend repairing potholes in 2013?
- How much did the London Borough of Bromley spend on compensation for cars damaged by unrepaired potholes in 2013?

Reply:

- 2,884 reports of carriageway issues during 2013 (please note – this figure does not allow for a distinction between potholes and other carriageway issues, nor does it classify between complaint or report, such as Fix my Street, for example).
- £103,258.
- £16,797 paid out during 2013 (please note - these are payments may not relate to 2013 but, perhaps, earlier years as well.)

Supplementary Question:

There was no supplementary question.

3. From Councillor Russell Mellor to the Resources Portfolio Holder

Can you advise as to the number of meetings scheduled for the Improvement and Efficiency Sub-Committee for the current Civic year and the number of meetings, which were cancelled for lack of business?

Reply:

There were four meetings of the Improvement and Efficiency Sub-Committee scheduled in the current civic year. None took place – they were all cancelled by me.

Supplementary Question:

Am I to assume in view of the zero number of meetings that we have convened that we have now reached the optimum in the improvement and efficiency of the Council?

Reply:

Would that we were. In each case, I take the proposed agenda and I consider whether items on there can be better dealt with better by another committee. I would recommend that action to every chairman of committees across this Council. It is extremely expensive and time consuming to organise committee meetings. You should not hold a committee meeting purely because it is scheduled on a calendar. You should look at it critically and decide whether the items there justify the meeting or whether the items can be dealt with better elsewhere. The other point I would make is that members of committees should not consider that the agenda is the sole property of either the chairman or officers. If they have items they wish to raise there is a procedure for doing that and I would encourage you to do that. If you felt that there were items during the course of the year that could probably be dealt with by that committee then you should perhaps draw that to the attention of the Chairman. In that case, I would have held meetings, if I felt it was right to do that, but I will not hold meetings just because of the schedule, I will save money across this Council wherever I can and I would advise others to do the same.

4. From Councillor Peter Fookes to the Care Services Portfolio Holder

Why are clients at Sutherland Court not being allowed to attend day centres?

Reply:

Sutherland Court is an extra-care housing unit where the aim is to provide a good level of support for residents in-house. Councillor Fookes has visited Sutherland Court and will know of the excellent facilities it provides. Services to residents are provided on the basis of a full assessment of need. The need includes, in this context, social need. It is the belief of the care managers that Sutherland Court, and the programme of activities it runs both generally and specifically, are such that they would meet the social needs of the residents. Therefore, the alternative of attending a day centre, is not needed.

The only exceptions at present are those with very specialised conditions such as dementia where the assessed needs of individuals may require specialist support.

Supplementary Question:

This seems absolutely disgraceful. In effect, our vulnerable residents, when we are supposed to be promoting independence, are more or less being held prisoner. Why is that the situation?

Reply:

I think any idea that we are keeping the residents prisoner is certainly not true. It is that we provide the care, the social need care, in-house in Sutherland Court which Councillor Fookes has visited and knows very well. Therefore, in terms of cost to the Council, there is no need for the residents to attend a day-centre as well. If they wish to attend a day-centre by themselves, paying for that, there is nothing to stop them doing that.

Additional Supplementary Question from Councillor John Getgood:

I think the Portfolio Holder's answer is jaw-dropping, it is going back fifty years. It is we decide what is best for you, never mind what you might think you want. It is top-down decision making and where is this freedom of choice? The whole Government policy was to allow elderly people to make their own choices about how they wanted to use any allowances they got, whether they wanted to take advantage of central provision, or to go out and make their own provision for their social needs. Now all of a sudden the Portfolio Holder has pulled the rug from underneath them. Does the Portfolio Holder think that is a good idea?

Reply:

I do not think it is a good idea if things are pressed on people, but if we provide an extra care housing service specifically for the residents the financial situation is such that we simply do not have the resources to provide day centre attendance as well.

5. From Councillor Tony Owen to the Resources Portfolio Holder

What would you advise my constituents at 5 Elm Grove, Orpington to do next? They bought their house with an extension, approved by the Council, containing a bedroom, living area, bathroom and kitchenette which enabled an elderly relative to retain a degree of independence within the confines of the house. The planning permission forbade any division of the property into two and none has taken place.

At some point in time the house was mistakenly redesignated as a house and an annexe. The valuation office has recently reaffirmed this redesignation from their desks. If they had visited they may have noticed that there is only one front door to the property and it is a single house with an extension.

Reply:

I can reassure him that this matter has now been resolved. I spoke with officers today and the matter has been dealt with satisfactorily. It is an interesting one and he quite rightly drew it to our attention. There are lessons to be learnt from this and I will be speaking to officers further about those lessons.

Supplementary Question:

This is 5 Elm Grove (shows a photo), it is the most magical thing since the king's invisible suit of clothes, and only if you are extremely wise (and that mainly means

you work at the Valuation Office) can you see an annex. If this fairy-tale continues, can the Portfolio Holder assure my constituents that their future Council tax demands will be no higher than if the house were taxed as a single dwelling.

Reply:

Yes.

Supplementary Question from Councillor Simon Fawthrop:

I take it from Councillor Arthur's last reply that this is what is meant by a class T exemption?

Reply:

Yes.

6. From Councillor Katherine Bance MBE To the Environment Portfolio Holder

The crossroads at Croydon Road and High Street Penge, continually have the highest statistics for KSI's in the borough. We have been told that the Council will work with TfL in 2014/15 to revisit this location to find an engineering resolution. Can you assure us that funds will be allocated to implement a resolution that can reduce these high KSI figures?

Reply:

I agree that this location needs attention and can advise you that in the 2014/15 – 2016/17 LIP programme, funds are indeed set aside for an investigation into the whole of this route through Penge (the A234), under the Congestion Relief heading, but with casualty reduction identified at this cross-roads as a priority as designs are being developed.

I expect that recommendations will come before Members towards the end of this financial year for potential implementation the year after.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for that response – it was what I was hoping to hear. If this comes in as an expensive resolution that you would still consider this as the priority and not decide, as has happened in the past, that for the amount of money to put the problems right at this location you could probably solve problems at three other junctions, and that we would get priority here, if it is just a case of the amount of money it will cost.

Reply:

Only a foolish politician would say that money is no object, and I clearly will not be doing that. Self-evidently, from the pot of money that we have available, unless the sum is astronomical and takes the full budget, I very much want to look at the most expensive in terms of KSI junctions first. It could be that, if this junction has, say, five KSIs, and for the cost of that scheme we could save four others with three KSIs, logic would dictate that you might look at the others, but I give you my assurance that it is very much my intention to get this sorted. It has been a long time and it needs doing.

7. From Councillor Russell Mellor to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader advise me of the changes, which have been undertaken within the Council operating structure since the commencement of the Commissioning programme, also confirming the date the programme was initiated together with substantiated and detailed cost savings since inception.

Reply:

Thank you Cllr Mellor for your question. This Council has a long and proud history of seeking the best, most efficient way of delivering Council services. For many years Members and officers of this Council have worked with service users (our residents) to move the organisation towards its established Target Operating Model as a commissioning organisation determining who is best placed to deliver high quality services based on local priorities and value for money principles. As a consequence approximately 30% of the Council's controllable spend is externalised. The Council's approach to becoming a fully commissioning authority with the majority of services, where appropriate, externalised, was given greater priority as a consequence of recent public sector funding cuts and the forecast financial gap that faces the Council, over the coming years.

In answer to your question, when the Commissioning programme commenced, my answer is, as I have just indicated, we have been on this road for some time now, it is not a new development but one we are having to give greater priority to over the next year or two to ensure we can continue to provide quality services to our residents within a balanced budget.

The second part of your question relates to the Council's Operating Structure which was restructured at the beginning of 2013 into three departments reflecting our focus on People and Place services and the Chief Executive's Department, comprising in the main, support services. This structure brings services together to better reflect a commissioning authority organisation structure.

As part of this restructuring a Commissioning team was established comprising key assistant directors in the three departments, Marc Hume – Lead Director, and Cllr Arthur – Portfolio Holder for Resources. The role of this team is to ensure corporate coordination in the delivery of the commissioning programme. Where appropriate proposals relating to individual services are submitted to the respective PDS Committees for scrutiny and approval.

Your last question asks about cost savings. As indicated earlier, significant efficiencies are already being achieved through our commissioning of services and our aim is to drive further savings through our current activities. However, I should clarify that commissioning of services in the public sector typically results in savings of c10% of costs (on the first occasion these are put to tender). Larger, more significant savings, have to be obtained by changing service specifications, or to put it another way, we need to focus on what we do as much as how we do it and this is being considered as part of our Baseline Review of all services. Only when we are clear on service specifications are we in a position to make considered decisions on commissioning out of services.

Our approach then to Commissioning is ongoing and the most recent cost savings we have achieved was in the Customer Services contract to Liberata, saving £68k pa with more savings from a further invest to save. Further reports will be brought to Members with detailed analysis and options in the following service areas: HR Transactional, Regulatory Services, Facilities Management, Parking Services, Transport, Education Services, Libraries, Direct Care Services, Nurseries, Phoenix Centre, Adult Education and other areas where appropriate. Reports will be considered by Cabinet and appropriate PDS Committees prior to the Executive consideration, and as before these reports will include recommendations on potential opportunities to commission services differently and will include assessments of future cost savings that can delivered.

I would be happy to discuss details of my response with Cllr Mellor at any time.

Supplementary Question:

I thank the Leader for his most comprehensive and detailed response to my question. It would probably be unfair of me if I was to put a further question probing into specific items that the Leader has referred to, and in that context I look forward to a detailed written response in the minutes.

8. From Councillor Peter Fookes to the Environment Portfolio Holder

Is he aware that Steve Reed, MP for Croydon North has commissioned an independent report into the state of the streets in his constituency?

Reply:

I don't tend to study the political machinations of inexperienced Labour MPs as a rule, but given your interest I have made an exception in this instance.

What I have found is quite interesting. It reveals that the latest recorded 'state of the streets' statistics for Lambeth, which Mr Reed led until recently, Croydon and Bromley read as follows.

Lambeth :

NI 195a (litter): 7%
NI 195b (detritus): 9%
NI 195c (graffiti): 12%
NI 195d (flyposting): No return

Croydon :

NI 195a (litter): 8.2%
NI 195b (detritus): 6.8%
NI 195c (graffiti): 2.3%
NI 195d (flyposting): 0.5

Bromley :

NI 195a (litter): 5.2%
NI 195b (detritus): 6.5%
NI 195c (graffiti): 1.0%
NI 195d (flyposting): 1.3%

Were one to be generous, one might opine that Mr Reed has mistakenly commissioned a survey of the wrong Borough.

Supplementary Question:

The reality is that shouldn't we be commissioning a similar independent report ourselves into what is going on in this borough, particularly with the increasing number of complaints that we are getting in the north of the borough over the fact that street cleaning is only taking place on one day a month and it is simply not good enough, particularly in urban areas.

Reply:

Labour cannot spend our money on enough silly reports. We have reports. If you look in front of you, you will see the reports of various street failures in the relevant boroughs – that is what the national indicators are for. They reveal time and time again that Bromley's streets are amongst the cleanest in London. Are they perfect? No. How can you help? Not by continually coming to the Council Chamber to try and boost your political kudos by complaining that your ward gets the rough end of the stick, which it does not. What you should be doing, as I have told you untold times, is report the faults as and when you see them. That way, the statistics can be gathered empirically, poor performance can be man-managed and corrected. But no, all we have, particularly in the run-up to the election times, is this continual ongoing complaint that you are being treated unfairly. It does you no credit and it does your residents no favours, that you are not representing them properly, and I would urge you to consider that in the new Administration if you are returned.

Additional supplementary question from Councillor David McBride:

Would the Portfolio Holder agree that there are still issues in certain parts of the borough with street cleaning, and is he aware of headlines on the Fix My Street website such as "street cleaning ineffective," "street cleaning not up to standard," "street cleaning outside the bus-shelter could be improved." Those are comments not from an opposition member but from the chairman of the Environment PDS Committee. Has he got any comments on Councillor Huntington-Thresher's views of street cleaning in his ward.

Reply:

I take Councillor McBride's comments constructively. Councillor Huntington-Thresher's comments (and you will find plenty of comments from me as well) show what all Councillors should be doing. You should be tending the faults in your ward and reporting them. It is by reporting them that we can tell if any crews are under-performing. The system acts as a magnificent management tool, please use it. That way, not only will your ward be seen to be represented but it will be better. I hasten to pay credit to a good number of colleagues who do use it, one of whom is sitting beside you. I would also point you to the work of Councillor Jefferys. Rather than just moaning about it, which seems to be the default position of far too many people, he has got together and formed a project with residents associations, and got the whole neighbourhood working together around keeping the streets better. It is the only way, we have to find £55m out of a £205m budget by 2017. There is not a money tree out there, the cavalry are not coming over the horizon, we have got to work with residents to do more together and we have got to be on the front foot, we have got to lead and not follow.

Additional supplementary question from Councillor Tom Papworth:

Will the Portfolio Holder agree with me that aggregate figures across the borough could potentially mask a multitude of sins. Could he circulate these figures to us broken down by ward so that each member may judge for themselves the efficiency in their own ward.

Reply:

I am very happy to give that undertaking. It is easily available and I will provide that to you hopefully by the end of the week.

9. From Councillor Peter Fookes to the Leader of the Council

What was the cost of the leaflet that went out recently in the borough from him with an explanation of the Council Tax for 2014/15?

Reply:

We feel it is extremely important to feed back to residents following the consultation process which took place prior to setting the budget, especially as many people took time to attend public meetings or send in written contributions for consideration. It is only right and proper that we explain, in a way that is accessible to all, the final outcome; how we are fighting for our fair share of funding; and how residents' money is being spent. That is why, in line with many other councils, we provide this information to every household, every year.

In previous years, the information was contained in a sixteen-page leaflet posted to all households. This year we have reduced the size of the communication to one single sheet of paper and included details on where to find further information on the Council's website. Since delivery took place as part of a regular door drop, we considered this to be a better and more cost effective solution to give residents more information about their council tax. This meant that we could keep costs to an absolute minimum of just 2p per household. Sometimes a small investment in paper, such as on this occasion, ensures that information we think our residents will want to know is instantly available to all. This also serves to signpost the many who do have access to the internet to the wealth of online information now available that they can consult at any time convenient to them, thus helping to save the council even more money in the future.

Supplementary Question:

Wasn't this just electioneering on the rates.

Reply:

No – we all know that it is not and it is just Councillor Fookes clutching at straws.

Additional Supplementary question from Councillor Tom Papworth:

As we are talking about peculiar bits of expenditure before the elections can he give an indication of whether the Council spent more on that leaflet than on doing up the Chamber Chamber? If we had a comparative figure that would give an indication of the prudence of this administration.

Reply:

I am not sure of the relevance of this question. You have heard the amount that was spent on distributing the leaflet on the council tax. The sum that was spent refurbishing the chamber was certainly more, but that is seen as invest to save, generating income for many years to come.