

## MEETING

28<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2010

### ORAL QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

#### 1. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Leader of the Council

What steps have already been taken to respond to the action taken by the Coalition Government to tackle the national deficit?

**Reply:**

Councillor Carr referred to the record of this Council in managing its affairs efficiently and effectively over the last few years, which meant to a certain degree that we had effectively anticipated the work required. He gave the following examples:

- In setting last years budget we eliminated £3m of overheads from, what the Leader considered to be, an already lean organisation;
- We have established an Improvement and Efficiency process to identify strategic options to reduce our cost base and were undertaking initial talks with near neighbours to improve procurement and make more efficient our service delivery;
- We have also over the past 5/6 years been able to move to setting a genuine revenue budget by sound scrutiny and monitoring of departmental spending benefiting the Borough enormously; and
- More importantly we have won the battle for funding the Concessionary fares scheme to change the system from a payment by issuance to one by usage. This had resulted in the repatriation of about £5m to the Borough which had enabled the Council to set aside funding to deal with the impact of the recession and providing for member priorities a sum of about £1.5m in the current year. He paid tribute to the work of Councillor Colin Smith in helping to achieve this outcome.

The only specific changes made to date to Bromley by the Government were the withdrawal of £1.6m in grants and Chief Officers were currently identifying measures to balance their budgets to deal with this.

**Supplementary question:**

Councillor Bennett asked whether the Leader would agree that one of the biggest wastes of money was providing statistics to the Government on a whole range of bogus targets. Did he not welcome the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment which would mean a considerable saving to Bromley in not filling in the statistics and a return to local government rather than local Council's being agents for central government?

**Reply:**

Councillor Carr fully agreed and was also glad to hear of the demise of the Government Office for London as well. He stressed the need to use what scarce resources there were to deliver outcomes and not worry about paper filling, ticking boxes and meeting the government's agenda of the day.

**2. From Councillor Getgood of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation**

When will the broken pipe to the waterfall in Crystal Palace Park be repaired?

**Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder advised that the repair to the waterfall was not just a case of repairing a broken pipe. It was thought that the original Victorian cast iron supply pipe to the waterfall was likely to be buried within the 'puddled' clay which lined the lake. Investigative works were being carried out to come up with a suitable design solution which would not affect the structural integrity of the lake. Once the extent and costs of these works were known, a decision would be made to determine if the works could be carried out in this financial year.

**Supplementary question:**

Councillor Getgood asked if he would remind his colleagues in Resources that Crystal Palace Park was a grade 2 listed Park and that the waterfall was an integral part of the nationally recognised dinosaur park and lakes. The Park was in the condition it was in now because it had been starved of appropriate maintenance over the years. There were problems getting the waterfall going but the community wanted it back. Could he therefore assure residents that there would be no further delay in responding to their wish to see this magnificent Victorian heritage restored to its full glory.

**Reply:**

Councillor Benington said he would be happy to speak to the Portfolio Holder for Resources on that basis. However, he would remind the member that it was the LDA that had had some control of the Park for several years and it was only in the last few months that we have been told they were not going to take over the whole running of the Park. There had therefore been a period of uncertainty. The main point was that with this pipe if the work was done badly the clay 'puddling' on the lake acted as a waterproofing and if that were damaged the water would disappear which would be a major catastrophe.

### **3. From Councillor Kathy Bance of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation**

Now that you have completed the new library and swimming pool in Biggin Hill are you able to focus on the needs of the people of Penge who are still waiting for their promised new library?

#### **Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder said he was pleased to assure the member that irrespective of the project recently completed at Biggin Hill, the needs of the people of Penge in respect of library provision had been a priority of the Council for the past 2 years. The member was no doubt aware that the Council's Property Division made an offer for the Edgingtons store which was thought to be fair and reasonable, but was subsequently turned down. The Property Division were continuing their endeavours in identifying a suitable location for a new modern library facility within the Penge area, and to this end were continuing dialogue with the owners of the former Edgingtons store, and were arranging viewing of 2 other prospective properties in the next few weeks.

#### **Supplementary question:**

Councillor Bance stated that provided that was the case she did not have a supplementary question.

### **4. From Councillor Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for Renewal and Recreation**

How many jobs will be lost in Bromley as a result of the axing of the Future Jobs Fund?

#### **Reply:**

Councillor Benington said that no jobs would be lost as a result of the funding for Future Jobs Fund (FJF) being deleted. Funding existed to pay for all placements on both intakes (total of 66 jobs). These jobs would continue to be filled in accordance with the terms of the funding that had already been allocated. In addition, the Bromley Field Studies Centre would be working in Partnership with South London Business to recruit and provide a further 50 Future Job Fund positions funded through their existing contracts to the benefit of Bromley residents, the Council and partner organisations.

#### **Supplementary question.**

Councillor Fookes did not have a further question.

### **5. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Portfolio Holder for Resources**

What is the latest estimate of the cost of the Council's pension scheme?

**Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council made employer contributions to the Pension Fund which, together with employee contributions, more than covered the payments required to be made from the Pension Fund each year. In the last full actuarial valuation of the fund (as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007), the actuary determined an average annual employer contribution of 14.7%, equivalent to £13.2 m in 2009/10 and a deficit contribution reaching £8.6m in the current year. The next actuarial valuation as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010 would be due with us shortly.

The costs of the pension scheme to the Borough were minimised by the excellent investment returns we deliver. It had recently been confirmed that over the last 5 year period Bromley had the highest yielding Local Authority pension fund in England.

Councillor Reddin went on to comment that whilst the position here in well run Bromley was less bad, elsewhere schemes were less well managed, or as was the case in many parts of the public sector – even operated as little more than unfunded Ponzi schemes. Statements by the Prime Minister last week indicated that the issue of public sector pensions was being recognised by central government. He was of the view that it was a ‘nettle’ that must be grasped soon by the public sector – as many private schemes have had to do – otherwise more jobs in the sector as a whole would be in the firing line. He expressed the opinion that it would, though take brave ministers and pragmatic unions to ensure that sustainable retirement provision for public sector workers was established.

**Supplementary question:**

Councillor Bennett asked whether the Portfolio Holder agreed that it was thanks to the excellent work of former Councillor Brian Toms as Chairman of the Investment Sub-Committee over many years that had produced such an excellent result for Bromley ratepayers in being top of the league and would he like to place that on record? Also did he welcome the fact that John Hutton, a former labour cabinet minister, had accepted the government’s invitation to look at the whole question of public sector pensions.

**Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder said he was very happy to place on record our thanks to former Councillor Toms who had brought his considerable experience from his working life to bear on the matter to the benefit of both pensioners and the Council tax payers of Bromley. He also likewise welcomed the appointment of John Hutton.

## **6. From Councillor Fookes of the Portfolio Holder for the Environment**

Is he satisfied with the level of street cleaning in the Borough?

### **Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder responded that he was, but far more importantly than whether he was satisfied was the fact that so were an ever growing number of Bromley residents as had been evidenced in recent surveys.

We must and would strive for even better standards at all times and this work was being carried forward as the results achieved over the past few years attested.

### **Supplementary question**

Councillor Fookes asked when were Penge residents going to see streets cleaned more often particularly those with parked cars. He understood this happened once a year and it should be more frequently. He asked when would the cars be moved so that proper cleaning could be carried out in that area.

### **Reply:**

The Portfolio Holder responded that he had already answered this question on previous occasions. However, to restate the previous government had funded Bromley with the second lowest level of per capita grant in London. As a result it was not possible to do everything we wanted all the time – so your streets would continue to be cleaned at an above average rate compared to other streets within the Borough. He invited Councillor Fookes to work with us by reporting faults and being involved with the street friends programme so that together things could go forward.

## **7. From Councillor Nicholas Bennett JP of the Chairman of the General Purposes and Licensing Committee**

If he will set out in table format the number of staff disciplinary actions for each of the past three years categorised by the following outcomes:

- i. no action, informal warning, final warning, dismissal:
- ii. the number of Disciplinary Appeals which were resolved at stage 1 (Line manager); Stage 2 (Chief Officer); Stage 3 Member Panel;
- iii. what was the cost of each stage of the process?

**Reply:**

Councillor Owen thanked the member for the challenge of putting an oral reply in table format. He referred Councillor Bennett to the report that went to the May General Purposes and Licensing Committee (27<sup>th</sup> May 2010), which was in answer to a very similar question, although Councillor Bennett had been unable to attend the meeting, having been delayed in Court, and missed the answers to his questions.

Councillor Owen had given Councillor Bennett a copy of the table (in colour) that had been presented to the Committee and quoted the following figures:

Disciplinary proceedings in each year:

2006/7 = 16 cases across the Council, of which 15 were in ACS/CYP;

2007/8 = 16 cases across the Council, of which 14 were in ACS/CYP;

2008/9 = 17 cases across the Council, of which 15 were in ACS/CYP;

2009/10 = increase to 28 cases across the Council, of which 17 were in ACS/CYP. The increase in cases came from Legal and Democratic and Renewal and Recreation.

Adding all the cases together over the four years totalled to a figure of 77. The number of cases where employees resigned before a hearing took place was 14. The number of cases where no further action was taken totalled 7. The number of cases where an oral caution but no formal disciplinary hearing took place was 16. The number of cases proceeding to a formal disciplinary hearing was 40, and of those cases, 4 proceeded to a formal hearing but were not upheld and 36 proceeded to a formal hearing where a sanction was imposed.

The second part of the question asked about the costs of each stage of the process – and he responded that the people taking part in the hearings were being paid by the Council anyway and the rooms being used were also paid by the Council so one answer he could give would be ‘nothing’. However, he did not think that was the answer Councillor Bennett was looking for! Councillor Owen had therefore provided a ‘ready reckoner’ for Councillor Bennett to come up with a figure which could be supported by calculating various data. Councillor Owen advised that at one end of the spectrum you have a nil cost and at the other you could come up with a rate of £500 an hour, which could be justified by the figures he gave.

**Supplementary question:**

Councillor Bennett requested that the table be attached to the Minutes as it was very useful. He asked if the Chairmen would agree with him that when appeals came to Member Panels and you had a Chief Officer plus a senior officer from HR acting as advisers, then you were talking about a considerable sum of money. He referred to ‘opportunity costs’ with two Chief Officers sitting in a hearing all day or days during which time they were not doing other work. He asked whether there was room for reform of the system.

**Reply:**

The Chairman replied that there was. He referred to the Minutes of the General Purposes & Licensing Committee for the meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2010 from which he quoted (Minute 6 refers) and stated they well reflected the various views expressed. He therefore responded that 'yes, if there was the will there was a way.'

**8. From Councillor Fookes of the Leader of the Council**

What is going to be the cost of publishing all council expenditure over £500 as directed by the new Condem government?

**Reply:**

The Leader of the Council replied that there would be no additional costs other than a small amount of in house time to produce an automated routine to extract the necessary data.

**Supplementary question:**

Councillor Fookes asked whether this would be a bureaucratic nightmare which would actually cost the Borough a fair amount of money and would he be making representations to the government to sort out the situation?

**Reply:**

Councillor Carr replied that there was an element of bureaucracy around it, but as he had already stated there was no additional cost and so no he would not be making representations.