

COUNCIL MEETING

9TH APRIL 2018

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC FOR ORAL REPLY

- 1. From Jason Colenso to the Leader of the Council** (to be put by Richard Lovell in Mr Colenso's absence)

Since 2013 Cllr Ellis has been LBB's representative as a Governor of Oxleas NHS trust. Oxleas say, until November 2017*, she attended just 1, out of 19, Governor meetings with only 5 apologies. Was the Leader aware and is this adequate representation on a critical health trust? Or is it indicative of LBB's attitude to mental health?"

**The last month for which information is available.*

Reply:

I was not aware of this and it does not reflect Bromley's attitude to mental health, and neither does it reflect Councillor Ellis' tireless work assisting on mental health over many years. She has a proven track record, probably second to none in this chamber.

I am advised that Cllr Ellis has had problems attending the many day time meetings, but has found the information invaluable in building up her knowledge of mental health service provision in Bromley and is able to compare this with the provision in neighbouring boroughs.

The meetings are well attended by the voluntary sector and service users and they provide relevant challenge to the providers.

Cllr Ellis sits on the health scrutiny committee for both Bromley and SE London and finds the information very valuable in that role, where Members hold Oxleas to account and challenge their service delivery.

Mental health is and always has been a priority for this Council. Cllr Ellis chaired a mental health advocacy charity for 5 years when not a Councillor and is the Council representative on Bromley Y and has regularly attended their evening meetings.

As a Council we are now working closely with our community mental health teams both to maintain residents in their homes but also to improve their in-patient care and discharge. The proposed health care changes recognise the need for both specialist mental health care but also a parallel health care plan for their physical needs.

- 2. From Dr Josh King to the Resources Portfolio Holder**

When was the last time a contractor was required to be replaced due to financial failure and what did the Council do?

Reply:

In 2017 a contractor went into liquidation who was building a small extension at Bishop Justus School. This was resolved by adding the remaining works to another contract for other school building works and the ESFA providing temporary accommodation for the school in the meantime.

Supplementary question

Dr Josh King did not have a supplementary question, but Councillor Angela Wilkins asked whether the Crystal Place Park Café was a more recent example, where the contractor had got into financial difficulties and another contractor had been appointed at an additional cost of £75,000.

Reply:

Councillor Arthur stated that if this was a later example he apologised for not having the most recent case, and he stated that if this was the case then there might be lessons to be learnt. Councillor Colin Smith added that Crystal Place Park was not within Councillor Arthur's Portfolio, but he confirmed that although there was a new provider with a marginal extra cost the business case showed that the Council would still be saving a significant sum over the years.

3. From Simon Jeal to the Education, Children and Families Portfolio Holder

In light of the investigations into children being groomed and subjected to horrific abuse on a massive scale in Rotherham, Telford and elsewhere, could the Portfolio Holder please confirm what actions have been taken to assess whether children in Bromley are likely to have become victims of such gangs?

Reply:

Children's social care works very closely with the Police, and has a co-located team called Atlas, which incorporates Police, social workers and staff, carrying out return home interviews when children go missing. Children who are subject to risks of sexual exploitation, or go missing from home or care, or at risk of exploitation from gangs are reviewed by multi-agency panels following which individual safety plans are put in place. It is important that we do not simply mark our own homework, so I thought it worth revisiting the report from the Ofsted monitoring visit which was conducted a few months ago – the focus of the visit was exactly this – services for young people at risk of sexual exploitation or going missing. Inspectors found that the service was making substantial progress in improving services for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, and some progress for those who go missing. No inadequate practice was found and aspects of good practice were identified in cases that were reviewed. Inspectors also acknowledged that the strong commitment from strategic partners, senior leaders and elected Members had resulted in priority action which had improved practice outcomes. This is an important issue and I thank Mr Jeal for bringing this up, and he is right to show concern, however, hopefully he can see that the rigorous scrutiny by Ofsted reconfirms this Administration's commitment to keep all of our children safe.

Supplementary Question:

I am very pleased to hear that the Ofsted report has shown that the service is improving, however, in a previous point in time between 2012 and 2016 services were inadequate. What efforts have been made by the Council to ensure that children and young people in looked after services and at risk in the Council's care during that period have been supported and protected from any risk they may have faced due to the Council's inadequacies?

Reply:

There was extensive work done to go back through those children who were under our care during that time and there has been extensive work to ensure that they are safe. Going into specifics of what we have done with the staff to focus on this, all children's social work staff have been trained in CSE, the YOS work with the gangs Police has ensured that themes are identified, vulnerable adolescents, which sit under the auspices of the Children's Safeguarding Board through the MASH discusses the themes and examines this, so I am confident that during that period where we could have done better we have picked up some of those loose ends. We have been recognised by external agencies, including Ofsted. The National Director of Social Care made a visit to Bromley to look at what we have done since that time, moving from where we were as Inadequate to our ambitions to be Good and better and being held as an exemplar to other Councils, like Croydon, who have had substantive failings in their Children's Services. We are happy to assist them to show that our journey to excellence is one that other boroughs can copy.

4. From Julie Ireland to the Education, Children and Families Portfolio Holder
(As Ms Ireland was not present a written reply would be sent.)

What percentage of social workers employed in Bromley's Children's Services are on permanent contracts, and what percentage are temporary?

Reply:

(To follow)

5. From Simon Jeal to the Care Services Portfolio Holder

The draft Bromley homelessness strategy report indicates some of the key messages that came from its consultation were that "The public felt that the best way to reduce homelessness is to reduce cuts and increase housing" and that "more affordable homes need to be built in the borough". Does the Portfolio Holder agree?

Reply:

The responses to the consultation indicated overwhelming support for the four strategic aims of the strategy. These centre on early intervention and prevention of homelessness, improving access to and promoting the supply of accommodation that is affordable across all housing sectors and to promoting health, wellbeing and resilience to break the cycle and reduce the risk of homelessness.

The detailed action plan supporting the Homelessness Strategy sets out the full activities being undertaken to implement these strategic aims and demonstrates the

continued investment in services in particular relating to early intervention and prevention.

Supplementary Question:

Mr Jeal did not have a supplementary question, but Councillor Angela Wilkins

6. From Simon Jeal to the Leader of the Council, to be answered by the Resources Portfolio Holder

Could the Council Leader please comment on the gender pay gap figures published by the London Borough of Bromley Council? In particular on figures showing women's mean hourly rate was 16.5% lower than men's for the period and how this compares to neighbouring boroughs such as Lewisham, Croydon and Bexley.

Reply:

The Council is now required to publish its gender pay report annually which involves publishing a number of different statistics including the mean pay gap, median pay gap, mean bonus gap, median bonus gap and % of men and women within each pay quartile.

Following the on-going public debates and interests, It is important to make clear from the onset that, contrary to how the figures are being presented and interpreted nationally, gender pay gap is not the same as equal pay gap. The latter, which is unlawful and discriminatory, simply means unequal pay for equal work i.e. like for like work or work of equal value by men and women.

The Council successfully carried out an equal pay audit with the cooperation/ agreement of staff representatives commonly referred to as "Single Status" or "Harmonisation of Terms and Conditions of Service" in 2009/10. It was based on a lengthy proper analytical examination of roles and grades in the organisation to ensure staff on a like for like roles or comparable roles were comparably paid and they were graded equally irrespective of their gender, or any other protected characteristics for that matter. The Council's equal pay audit was legally compliant and unlike some Councils, both in London and across the country, the Council successfully rebutted challenges from the so-called 'No win No fee lawyers' or Ambulance chasers. Some Councils had to pay millions out in compensation following costly protracted litigations in court. Bromley Council has not lost any equal pay claim to date.

The Council's gender pay gap is 16.5%. Actually, it is about 11% when you take into account merit payments, because they have been going mainly to female staff, disproportionately, so it is narrower than you would think. If you look at the recent appointments that have been made at high level the figure for the current year will be in single figures, so it is of diminishing size. That makes it lower than the national average of 18% but higher than in some neighbouring authorities. The Bexley rate, for example, is 7.9%; Croydon's is the other way at -1.6%, in other words the average female pay is higher than the average male's, and in Lewisham it is the same at -10.9. Those are the figures you have asked for; what you construe from that is left to individuals to work out.

Supplementary Question:

Over three quarters of the Council's staff are women based on the figures in the return, but the data shows that women are over-represented in the lowest paid quartile of staff and underrepresented in the highest quartile. As Councillor Owen noted in the Evening Standard last week, all the directors are male. What is the Council's action plan to address these gaps and ensure that women are fairly paid and able to progress to all levels in the Council?

Reply:

That statistic is absolutely not true. We have two female directors, and one of them is the highest paid director in the Council. You need to be very clear about what you are saying, you cannot just repeat what is said in a newspaper article. We have five women employed on temporary contracts at high level, and when those contracts are converted to permanent contracts this year the figure will be in single figures.

Additional Supplementary Question from Councillor Vanessa Allen:

It was not just any newspaper article, it was someone sitting in this room calling this meaningless dogma. I would like to have more reassurance from the Portfolio Holder that he is taking this seriously. We know that Bromley has a higher proportion of women on lower salaries and that is probably reflected in the merit payments as well. I do not think that we can pretend that there is nothing to do here and we would like to see more firm plans.

Reply:

I think that the bald figure is indicative of all sorts of things that we might want to think about, but what is important to me is that the route to senior positions is equally open to male and female members of staff. That is why we are investing so much money in training staff to prepare them so that they can do their own job better, but also so that they can be advanced. There is also, perhaps, a need in the longer term to look at flexible working and other arrangements that would make it more friendly for female staff. I do believe that there is no evidence whatsoever that we do not pay the fair rate for the job, regardless of gender.