

SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING

30TH MAY 2018

URGENT QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL FOR ORAL REPLY

1. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Deputy Leader of the Council

How much value do you place on the induction and training sessions organised by the Council for Members?

(Justification for urgency – The induction process will be complete by the end of June.)

Reply:

I believe that the inductions serve a helpful purpose for Members who elect to attend them and their feedback tends support this view.

Supplementary Question:

Will he consider at least a metaphorical applause for the Labour group which has so far put in near 100% attendance at these sessions, and what will he be able to do to encourage his own Members to follow suit?

Reply:

The Inductions are useful; people decide to learn how it best suits them. Some people do it through formal inductions, some with support from colleagues and some on the job. People who are elected representatives, who have been sent here can make up their own mind about how they wish to contribute to the Council. I do not think that whipping is appropriate - I do not think that putting mandatory directions in place is something that works or treats people like adults. This is probably one of the fundamental differences between a pragmatic Conservative view and a dogmatic Labour one.

Additional Supplementary Question:

Councillor Simon Fawthrop whether the Deputy Leader agreed that the implication from the Labour Group was that experience counted for nothing.

Reply:

Experience is very important and there is a lot of experience on these benches. When I joined the Council in 2010 there was a friendly arm put around me and I was guided and steered and given help when I needed it, not just from Members and colleagues but from officers as well. I do take the point that it is worth saying thank you very much to the officers for pulling this together. All of the information is subsequently emailed out and in my experience officers are always there to help and guide if it is needed.

2. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

Universal credit will be rolled out across Bromley in July, could you please outline the actions the department has taken to prepare for the impact it will have on Bromley residents?

(Justification for urgency – The roll out of Universal Credit begins in Bromley in July.)

Reply:

Universal Credit 'Full service' starts in Bromley on 25th July 2018. Preparations have been on-going with the Jobcentre Plus to ensure that residents that are affected by this will receive the support needed to claim Universal Credit.

London Borough of Bromley has a partnership with Bromley CAB to provide Budgeting Support to all those on Universal Credit to ensure they can pay their rent and do not get into debt. There is also an increased provision for money and debt advice within the Housing department as part of the ongoing homelessness prevention work.

An advice HUB is being created at the Jobcentre which will be staffed by the Jobcentre, Clarion Housing Association, CAB, LB Housing and the Children's Project.

The DWP will shortly be starting a major advertising campaign locally to make residents aware that Universal Credit is the benefit they should apply for. There will also be events for landlords and partner organisations to ensure that any questions are answered and landlords know what to expect if they have a tenant on Universal Credit.

Supplementary Question:

Other councils where the roll-out has occurred have seen increases in evictions, people getting into severe debt and becoming homeless. Given the large number of vulnerable residents in the private rented sector on insecure tenancies how will the Council seek to prevent this happening in Bromley?

Reply:

I share your concerns. Universal Credit has caused problems where it has actually been implemented. I went to the north of England and saw how a pilot was operating there. We also took part in the consultation process and asked for certain changes to be made, and indeed some of those changes have been made. One I was particularly concerned about was the idea that the total payment would be made to one person in the household. I think in some households that would be very problematical and that has now been changed – it can be split payments. Also, payments can now be made to the landlord in certain cases – I think this is an improvement. The reduction in delay in payments, which has been halved, as far as I understand it, in some areas that has not been working very well and we need to look at that closely. The fact is that Universal Credit is coming; it has all-party support. There is no point in us being in denial about it, we just have to make sure that we are as prepared as we can be, and I think that we have done that.

Additional Supplementary Question:

Councillor Kevin Brooks commented that, where Universal Credit had been implemented, the people that it had hit most were the most vulnerable people - people who did not open envelopes, who did not have support services that we might think are quite easy. For that most vulnerable group of people, and I realise that Universal Credit is not a Council decision, what are the Council pro-actively doing to ensure that that group of people do not get into debt which spirals out of control and leads to homelessness and further health issues?

Reply:

I have walked through that with officers and with the pilot when I was up there. It is an area of great concern for all members of the Council and I think what we will have to do is to organise a briefing session in the month of July where we can walk through cases and if people have concerns they can be addressed by officers.