

COUNCIL MEETING

14th October 2019

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC FOR ORAL REPLY

1. From Steve Barnes, Chair, Downe Residents' Association, to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

Given the extreme disruption to local people, bus services, school runs, local businesses, tourists and visitors by sudden and un-announced road closures by utility companies – witness several examples by Thames Water in Downe village recently - what actions will the Council take to minimise such disruption?

Reply:

The Council has powers to co-ordinate planned works undertaken by statutory undertakers to minimise traffic congestion, however, in the case of new supplies and emergencies, utility companies have their own legal responsibility to complete all necessary works to ensure safety and restore supplies, and in the case of emergencies do not need to notify the Council until the works are underway. The Council will continue to work closely with all utility companies in an effort to reduce the inconvenience of works on the highway, but until the utility companies have upgraded all of their infrastructure we will be susceptible to the need for emergency works.

Supplementary Question:

I understand that the Council can take action against utility companies who abuse the permit system, for example, claiming a repair is an emergency when in fact there is evidence that the problem has existed for some time. What actions will the Council take in such instances?

Reply:

If anybody does supply us with the information and evidence that a utility company is abusing those powers then we will take action under the powers we have. We will need to have the information provided to us. It is a challenge for us to know what exactly is an emergency and what isn't when you come to gas and water.

Additional Supplementary Questions from Cllr Simon Fawthrop

We have had Thames Water again in Petts Wood and Knoll ward, and it is funny how it is an emergency and they can rush out, stick up temporary traffic lights and then there is nobody there for about three weeks whilst it is being repaired, and then even when they have repaired it they leave it as a mess for another three weeks so that it is not actually repaired with any urgency. There's an urgency for them to get the traffic lights up, but no urgency for them to actually repair it. What is being done to enforce with Thames Water, particularly with the examples that we have already given in Petts Wood?

Reply:

As linked within our statutory works, we will do what we can. However, I would make the point that, given the amount of repairs that, certainly, Thames Water has to do it may not be possible for them to get a contractor on site to repair it but at the same time, particularly with Thames Water, where the water can actually excavate under road caverns it will be necessary to make sure vehicles do not drive over aspects and then sink into a hole, which has been seen elsewhere in the borough. We do encourage utility companies to get sufficient contractors available to them to repair them, but in some cases I can see that lights will be necessary to protect the motorist and protect the road. We are doing everything we can to try to keep traffic flowing on our roads. It goes back to the petition as well. We are doing that and we will continue to do that, using the powers we have.

2. From Andy Richardson to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

Why does Bromley Council not have a Stakeholder's Group of library users, staff and local interest groups to inform their Library Service contracts managers of the current and future service requirements of the contracted out library service?

Reply:

The Council does not currently have a Stakeholder Group because there are many existing ways that users, residents and their elected representatives are able to comment on service requirements. These include constant online customer surveys as well as more detailed annual surveys; hard copy customer feedback forms in each library; a dedicated e-mailbox for customers to raise issues on the website; customer social media feedback and interaction through Facebook and Twitter; stock suggestion books in each library; a review of the contract performance twice a year by elected Members; Ward Member comments passed to the contract managers on behalf of residents. All of this means that a wider range of views is taken into account than would be the case with one Stakeholder Group.

Supplementary Question:

In my previous career as an NHS librarian for 15 years I served on the National Core Content Stakeholders Group. I was also a contract manager with the National Library for Health. Stakeholder Groups were written into the NHS contracts monitored, and advised contract managers over issues and development of service. Key performance indicators were closely monitored. I would like to know that, having had the experience of a stakeholder group meeting, would the Councillor agree with me that the establishment of a stakeholder group to aid the library contract management team, would enhance the future delivery of Bromley libraries?

Reply:

I will certainly have a look at it, but I think that what we have at the moment is more than what you are suggesting. I am very happy to talk about this with officers to see if there is any point or purpose in having such a group.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Angela Wilkins

Is it not the case that one of the benefits of a stakeholder group is that it is actually a conversation, whereas all the things that you have referred to are, at least most of them, for comments? It is not a conversation or a dialogue.

Reply:

I am sure you are right, but it depends on how often the stakeholder group meets. What we have here is an ongoing ability to make comments, and we do, of course, reply if it is a question or a suggestion that we want to talk about.

3. From Andy Richardson to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

Is it legitimate for the current administration to commit its Leisure Centre management to a contract for forty years - ten times the life span of its present regulatory responsibility?

Reply:

This is about the Mytime contract. The Council has not entered into a 40 year service contract. It has granted a suite of leases many of which contain break clauses which can be exercised if circumstances change. This is an innovative approach to leisure provision which ensures that valued leisure facilities continue to remain available to residents of the borough whilst also providing a more economically beneficial service model for the Council and council tax payers than traditional leisure contracting.

Supplementary question:

Does the leisure centre contract have a stakeholders group of leisure staff, leisure users and sports groups in Bromley?

Reply:

Not so far as I am aware.

(During consideration of this question, the Mayor, Councillor Nicholas Bennett, declared an interest as he had a Mytime Active swimming pass. Councillors Aisha Cuthbert and Robert Evans declared interests as they were Board Members of Mytime Active.)