

Renewal, Recreation and Housing PDS Committee**20th December 2019****Public Questions to the Renewal, Recreation and Housing Portfolio Holder****1. From Sue Blackburne**

Please could the Council confirm that any consultation will include the possibility of not moving the library from its current location on the basis that the current premises are more suitable and preferred by local residents, and that it will not simply be a narrow consultation on the Public Halls refurbishment proposals/housing proposals?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The consultation will enable people to comment on the reasons that they do not support any proposal that comes out of the viability work.

Supplementary Question

Will the consultation be on the proposals to use the Library site for housing?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The viability study that we are doing is for the Public Halls not for the Library. So it is about moving the Library into the Public Halls and seeing how that works. That is what the consultation will be about.

Supplementary Question

So there will be an opportunity for people to say if they disagree with the proposal?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes of course.

2. From Graham Clayden MD FRCP FRCPCH

How was it possible that the committee concluded that there was no negative impact on children when the child population (2011 census) in the wards close (or safe access) to existing site greatly exceeds that of Copers Cope ward? Isn't crossing three major roads from station more dangerous than one?"

Portfolio Holder's Response

There is no negative impact on the child population as both sites are served by public transport which goes door to door, car ownership is high and children walking should be accompanied by parents. Older teenagers walking alone would have road safety awareness which is taught by schools and are expected to use pedestrian crossings.

Supplementary Question

There are a number of children who live in the wards affected and the ward closest to Clock House has the highest number. I am concerned that the children who can use the facilities for study (not just books), would be travelling by public transport and good access routes to the Library is vitally important. Libraries are more than just a place for books, they are a place for study. In the Building a Better Bromley document, the Council admits that giving Bromley's children the best start in life includes having a library. A library close to their physical exercise makes a lot of sense.

Portfolio Holder's Response

There are children distributed all over the town of Beckenham and a proper study will be undertaken however, in all probability there are more children living closer to the proposed new library. Children living at the other end will have the opportunity to visit Penge library as well. All of this will be looked at as part of the viability study.

Supplementary Statement

It is very important though for you to look at the feasibility and the access point. One thing you have to do is look at the speed of travel and easy access to a place. You will find that the population density around Clock House and Eden Park is where people live.

3. From John Mansi

Having spent £70,000 of resident's money, on consultants to progress the proposals, can you publish a full copy of their report. Please confirm that this contract was awarded in full compliance with applicable Council Procurement Rules?

Portfolio Holder's Response

£70,000 has not been spent, that is the estimated cost of undertaking the viability works which this report sought approval to proceed with.

Supplementary Question

Can you confirm that this contract was awarded in full compliance with applicable Council procurement rules?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The contract has not been awarded.

Supplementary Question

Will it be?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes, of course it will be.

Supplementary Question

And it will go out to full commercial tender and open to audit?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes.

4. From Garnet Frost

The Council has agreed to consider a report concerning these proposals, which is being compiled by The Beckenham Society. Eventually, this may consist of several chapters, but the most urgent and comprehensive submissions received to date refer to spatial measurements. Is the committee willing to hear an outline of this objective yet compelling evidence?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Whilst we are open to reading your work the Council will of course be appointing its own specialists to undertake the viability assessment. The sizes of the two buildings are already known – the main spaces in the existing library total 569m², and the main spaces in the Public Hall total 639m².

Supplementary Question

There is compelling evidence to refute that overall suggestion. I have with me here Mr Goy and Mr Cole who spent a long time measuring the spaces and checking one another's measurements and have produced some very compelling, graphics. I assume the purpose of this meeting is to examine evidence. We have factual evidence here. What is the point of the meeting if the evidence is not actually considered?

Portfolio Holder's Response

That is not the purpose of this meeting – that is what the viability assessment will do.

Supplementary Question

So what is the purpose of the meeting then?

Chairman's Response

The purpose of this meeting primarily is to discuss the wording of one of the recommendations from the Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS meeting. It is specifically about the use of the existing Beckenham Library site for housing in the event that the library proposal does not go ahead. I have read the documents submitted by Mr Goy and I think a lot of the difference in sizing comes down to whether the main hall will be used for library purposes or otherwise.

Portfolio Holder's Response

There has been a lot of confusion about what rooms in the Public Halls could be used as a library and that is what the feasibility study is all about. If I am not happy with the outcome, we will not do it.

Supplementary Question

The only way to squeeze the library service into the Public Halls would be to commandeer the lease from the Club.

Portfolio Holder's Response

No.

5. From Hulya Mustafa

As well as proposals to demolish the library and build flats, can the remit for any work by consultants also consider –

a) how to further enhance the library and other services in the current site, given it is a cultural and leisure 'hub' of which the Council should be proud of, and which it could value and improve and

b) other sources of income for the refurb of the public halls which would be of lower impact than demolishing the library, as the Council seems to be unable to identify any (although it is noted, they have managed to find £300k to refurb Bromley Library.) And if not, why not?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The work will address the viability of the proposal, and as such will also address the impact of not proceeding. Funding will be considered as part of this.

Supplementary Question

So the consultants are just looking at Beckenham Public Halls?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes.

Supplementary Question

They are not looking at what will happen to the current Beckenham Library site?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Not initially.

6. From Patrick McGrath

Why has the Churchfield Rd relocation of the Recycling centre to the 1 hectare site below its current position not been considered as a suitable alternative to permanently removing a considered community service? The relocation would free a 1.1 hectare site for housing development in an already residential area.

Portfolio Holder's Response

As far as we are aware this land is not for sale, and even if it were it is unlikely to be suitable for development in any case. We believe there are two pylons on the site and access is limited.

Supplementary Question

Having already spoken to the owners of that particular site, they were very eager to engage in that particular project which would have released the existing recycling centre land for development of housing. It would have been easier to develop something that was in a residential environment going with the residential requirements and also use brownfield sites which would encourage further negotiations with the Council to develop a relationship so the Council is not trying to squeeze these development and losing essential community icons.

Portfolio Holder's Response

The Council has to build 1,000 homes over the next three years. Every single site that the Council owns is being considered. Some sites are suitable, some are not and we have to find lots of other land besides. It may well include the Churchfield Road depot. We do not have a lot of brownfield land in Bromley.

Supplementary Question

To be more inclusive with arguments like this, in regard to the public who are bringing up these suggestions, a forum would be good where suggestions could be considered in a much better fashion. This could be bypassed altogether by taking on a 1.1 hectare piece of land which would obviously provide more housing than the site you are arguing about right now.

Portfolio Holder's Response

My point is, we need both.

7. From Mrs Caroline Duguid

Given that the library is already the 3rd most popular in the borough, has any research has been carried out as to what impact investment in its current site might have?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Previous experience, for example the move of Orpington Library, has shown that moving libraries in to town centres increases usage. There is no funding to invest in the library on its current site so this is not an option at this time.

Supplementary Question

You are claiming that the project is cost neutral, so if that is the case why not put the money straight into the Public Halls to refurbish that building and leave the library where it is?

Portfolio Holder's Response

It is only cost neutral if we develop the Beckenham Library site which will generate well over £2m as well as providing 50% affordable housing for the homeless. If we didn't develop the library site then we would not have the money to do the public halls.

Supplementary Question

The main point of the report is about the under-utilisation of the Public Halls not about the library. So why is it that our public buildings are being stretched so far that we are having to get rid of our valuable assets such as libraries just because the Public Halls (which is a very utilised within the community) has been left in this state. Why do we have to rob Peter to pay Paul in that respect?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Because I am afraid the public purse is very short of money. We have had austerity for the last 10 years and the budget has been cut by some £90m per year so we do not have the money to spend as we would like on our buildings.

Supplementary Question

I am just wondering, with an investment portfolio worth £350m and in 2019 an additional £19m investment in commercial property, could some of this money be used for housing on Bromley's existing Brownfield sites?

Portfolio Holder's Response

It will.

Supplementary Statement

The library is actually just a five minute walk away from the High Street in its existing state and is ideally located with The Spa, Beckenham Baptist Church and Venue 28. It is a really hub for the community there.

Portfolio Holder's Response

That point is noted.

8. **Stuart Froment**

The Equality Impact Assessment of October 2019 states, at the top of page 4, that the current Beckenham Library Building is tired and in need of repair and redecoration. Has the Council evaluated the cost of this work? If not, why not? If so, how much is it? Does the Council agree that all the services that could be provided at Beckenham Public Halls could just as easily be provided at the existing library?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The Council suspended its redecoration programme for all sites seven years ago so there is no budgetary provision. The Council reacts to urgent repairs as required and any required high value works are added to the planned programme. Statutory testing and any subsequent remedial works are carried out.

We think the Public Hall offers more scope for a developing library service than the current building, however this won't be known until this first stage of viability work is carried out.

Supplementary Question

It might be a good idea to have costed the refurbishment of the library so it could remain where it is? It seems odd to move forward with moving the library to the public halls without looking at whether or not it is possible to retain the existing library where it is.

Portfolio Holder's Response

Clearly it would be possible to retain the existing library where it is but what we achieve with this proposal is (a) a fantastic refurbishment of the Public Halls and (b) the provision of up to 40 new homes which is very much required.

Supplementary Statement

I am still slightly of the opinion that the existing situation should be examined before the whole matter proceeds much further than this.

9. **From Alan Old**

The Council makes reference for the urgent need to provide new housing in the borough, and uses this argument as a principal reason for demolishing the library and selling the site.

Two years ago, researchers at Jones Lang Lasalle carried out a report into building homes on council-owned sites used as surface car parks in suburban London, often old WW2 bomb sites. They identified 45 such sites in the borough of Bromley alone.

See this article in Homes and Property 17th September 2019: <https://www.homesandproperty.co.uk/property-news/world-car-free-day-2019-80000-homes-could-be-built-on-london-car-parking-spaces-within-a-mile-of-a-133491.html> ; and this one, in The Evening Standard, 2nd November 2017:

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/building-flats-on-london-car-parks-could-solve-housing-crisis-report-suggests-a3674256.html>

Has the Council conducted feasibility studies on all of these assets with regard to providing housing, following the publication of this research?

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes and this is an ongoing piece of work. To date three car park sites are being progressed for housing – Burnt Ash, Anerley and West Wickham, Station Road.

Supplementary Question

The Council has made reference to the urgent need to provide housing in the borough which is the reason for demolishing the library. JLL identified 45 sites in the borough itself. Has the Council assessed and carried out initial feasibility studies on all those sites?

Portfolio Holder's Response

I believe I am correct in saying we have. Some were immediately discarded as being unfeasible, others are still being looked at and at least three were deemed in a fit state to move forward with which is what we are doing. We are, however, looking at every single piece of land including car parks.

Supplementary Question

Will the Council publish their assessment of all of these 45 identified sites?

Portfolio Holder's Response

We hadn't intended to, there is no particular reason why we should but there's no particular reason why we shouldn't either. It is a big piece of work to ask officers to do and they are short of time but we will do it if we can.

Second Round of Questions

10. From Sue Blackburne

Has any thought been given to including a library in the proposed housing development project e.g. by having a dedicated library on the ground floor of the housing and if not, why has that not been considered?

Portfolio Holder's Response

This has not been considered as the Equality Impact Assessment has shown there to be no negative impacts that can't be mitigated in relation to the potential move. Moving the library to the Public Hall would bring the library into a more central location and bring a new lease of life to the building.

Supplementary Question

It seems like an obvious alternative proposal – I am wondering why the different, various options have not been explored because that certainly seems to be one that might satisfy different interests in terms of what people want.

Portfolio Holder's Response

Yes. It makes sense on the face of it but the fact of the matter is that if we put the library back on the ground floor (a) we would have a problem for two years whilst it was being built (which could be overcome with temporary building but that is not satisfactory) and (b) a great many of the housing units would be lost and therefore no cash would be generated from the development and subsequently we could not refurbish the Public Halls with that money.

Supplementary Question

But if it is a five storey building, you wouldn't lose that many units if you kept the library on the ground floor.

Portfolio Holder's Response

We would clearly lose some.

11. From John Mansi

I understand that you have allocated a further £300,000 for further hire of consultants. Can you please issue the parameters that will be laid on any future consultants and confirm that this will be subject to all procurement rules which apply?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The specification cannot be shared until after the tender process has taken place. Procurement rules will be adhered to.

Supplementary Question

How will we get to audit the process as members of the public?

Portfolio Holder's Response

From all tenders that the Council puts out, the results are submitted to the appropriate committee. If it is a very big project (in terms of money), it also goes to the Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS Committee and the full Executive of the Council. All of these committees audit the process on behalf of the public. Sometimes, in terms of the results of the actual bid are commercially confidential and are studied in Part 2 of the Council agendas and are, therefore, not available to the public.

Supplementary Question

Will we be able to audit the bid document as members of the public and how will we get access to it?

Portfolio Holder's Response

As far as I know, yes. I will find out how and let you know.

12. From Hulya Mustafa

The proposals cite a potential 5-storey development of 46 flats and 33 parking spaces. This gives a very finely balanced financial case of c £2m to refurbish the public halls. However, a 5-storey block is unlikely to get planning permission in a conservation area, and councillors have already recognised that 46 flats is a maximum and will likely be less. In addition the proposal includes 33 parking spaces, which given the acknowledged well-served location, is unnecessary and unenvironmental, so this should also be reduced. A reduction in number of flats or parking, will inevitably impact the amount any developer will give for the land, impacting the financial case.

In the Council's current view, at what point -

- (a) will the value of the land (as determined by the anticipated planning value) cease to be viable, and indeed become an overall financial cost to the council? and
- (b) will the number of housing units possible make it unattractive, given the complexity of the project and significant loss of amenity involved?

Portfolio Holder's Response

At this time the viability assessment will work on a cost neutral basis, however this may change in the future.

Supplementary Question

You are trying to make enough money from the existing Beckenham Library site to cover the refurbishment of Beckenham Public Halls. How much is that?

Portfolio Holder's Response

We have set a maximum of £2m.

Supplementary Question

In your previous answer you said if you lost the ground floor to another library that reduces it. You said yourself you did not think it would be five storeys and that reduces it. Do you have any sense at what point (given the planning application), you would consider the scheme is not financially viable or unattractive in terms of the number of houses that could be built?

Portfolio Holder's Response

To raise £2m we would need about 20 units possibly a few less units than that.

Supplementary Question

And what about parking and amenity space?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The parking is part of the units element and in accordance with the Mayor's parking provision in the London Plan.

Supplementary Question

Does that mean you could go ahead with this proposal by just having 20 private homes and not having the affordable units?

Portfolio Holder's Response

I don't think we would do that.

Supplementary Question

Have you considered building on The Spa car park which is just behind, given what you were saying about surplus car parks?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The Spa car park is for users and is a different issue than parking for residents. So I doubt we would want to do that. But we will consider anything.

13. From Mrs Caroline Duguid

With an investment portfolio worth £350 million in 2019 and an additional £90 million investment in commercial property, could some of this money be used for housing on Bromley's existing brownfield sites instead of selling off more public assets and fundamentally altering the character and function of an existing conservation area?

(The library is currently very well placed as part of a hub consisting of the Spa, the Library, Venue 28, Beckenham Baptist church and the Clock House parade of shops as well as being a 5 minute walk from Beckenham High Street.)

Portfolio Holder's Response

The Council is utilising some of its capital monies to take forward housing schemes – in the past year we have started to progress five housing schemes in different wards across the borough. However a careful balance has to be struck as the Council relies on income from investments to reduce the impact of the budget cuts on services.

Supplementary Question

I am aware that Bromley is one of the richest boroughs and to me it seems phenomenal that you are having to get rid of these public assets such as libraries which families really rely on. Why can't you use some of your reserves?

Portfolio Holder's Response

The point is, we do need to provide homes. We have to find all the sites that we possibly can including our own sites including library sites where feasible. The reason why Bromley is one of the richest boroughs is because we have been very prudent and put money aside and we've invested it. The income from that enables us to provide the services. If we did away with that we would not be able to provide the services.

Supplementary Question

I thought the point of the project was for the Public Halls to be utilised and not provide housing. Surely that is the main point of the report?

Portfolio Holder's Response

There are two stages to this project. The first is to find out whether we are able to move the library to the Public Halls consistent with everything else that goes on there. If it is, then we can talk about the redevelopment of the library site which would produce the money for the other scheme.

Chairman's Statement

One of the main elements of this project is to provide housing.

Supplementary Question

What about the bats?

Portfolio Holder's Response

We will study that when it comes to it.

Supplementary Question

Will it be part of the £17k feasibility study?

Portfolio Holder's Response

We have not yet discussed this but will in due course. You are quite right, it may be wise to do it now. If we can do it now we will.

14. From Stuart Froment

The feasibility study states that there would be partial remodelling of the park landscape adjacent to the existing library, but with no net loss of open space, and that loss of trees requires mitigation. Given that the proposed flats are to occupy parkland between the current library and Beckenham Road, how is the net area of parkland to be protected? The document does not show any private amenity space surrounding the proposed flats. Does the Council undertake not to allow any of the parkland to be used as private amenity space for the flats at any time in the future? How will the existing trees be protected, being in the Elm Road Conservation Area,

and, if any are removed, will they be replaced with the same number and size? Will memorial trees be preserved?

Portfolio Holder's Response

This will only be known once we undertake the viability work. However the massing study that was produced (provided as an appendix to the report) shows that zero loss of green space could be achieved.

Supplementary Question

I am concerned about whether any of the park land will be used for private amenity space as the drawings in the feasibility study indicate that the building would have any private land around it. Often, flats have some private amenity space around them. I am concerned that the park land might be eroded.

Portfolio Holder's Response

It is not our intention and I am happy to give an undertaking on that.