COUNCIL MEETING

7th December 2020

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL FOR ORAL REPLY

1. From Cllr Nicholas Bennett to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

What is the debt and any interest paid by council taxpayers in Bromley compared with neighbouring boroughs?

Reply:

The figures have been circulated (see <u>Appendix</u> 1.) What they show is the fundamental truth, which is as old as time, that if you live within your means you do not become hostage to your lenders. It is entirely sensible to borrow to finance investment on occasion to secure future yields, but not to subsidise income or to avoid taking hard spending decisions. The policies of our Council, established over many years, of innovation and prudence, have stood us in good stead. Releasing our housing stock, outsourcing our leisure services, partnership working with a variety of specialist providers – they have all contributed, but the core is prudence, living within your means, taking the tough decisions early and all these have been the key.

Supplementary Question:

The figures show that Bromley has no debt and no interest charges. Neighbouring Croydon has £1.5bn of debt and neighbouring Lewisham has £46m interest charges, which are charged to the Council tax payer each year – I believe it is over £700 per Council Tax payer. What conclusions does he draw between the behaviour of neighbouring boroughs and Bromley?

Reply:

Fundamentally, for me, it is a betrayal of trust. To rack up debts of £1,500m and to saddle the next generation with an annual debt being 20% of their Council tax just to service that debt is something that needs to be answered for. I think that people who are in a position of trust are handling moneys that are given to them in trust by their residents, and if they betray that trust then I think they deserve a come-uppance.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Angela Wilkins:

In what category, and how would you describe, the London Borough of Bexley, given their particular problems at the moment?

Reply:

To be very clear in what I am saying, I do not believe that incompetence and betrayal is the province of any particular party. I think that it crosses all parties and if you look at some councillors, be they Northamptonshire or if you look at the way that Bexley currently have got issues I think that everybody needs to look at the way they are running their business and ask whether they are living within their means and if they

are showing true innovation and true prudence. I do not think that is the province of any particular party.

2. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Leader of the Council

Many London Boroughs have spent close to £1m on contact tracing. Apparently Bromley's expenditure on this work is extremely low because existing staff have been diverted to it. This is a tribute to our staff, but what work isn't being done as a consequence and what is the financial "opportunity cost" of this to the Council?

Reply:

The short answer to both of those questions is none. There is a fantastic story underpinning the local arrangements which should be showcased. Whilst other boroughs have indeed reached directly for taxpayer's cash to hire-in additional resource, in Bromley the challenge has been taken up by fifty-six volunteers drawn from amongst our existing workforce in addition to their other duties, all of whom are keen and eager to serve far over and above what is ordinarily expected of them out of commitment and dedication to the local community that over 60% of Bromley staff call their home. I know from discussing this phenomena at length with the Chief Executive that, especially building as it does on the Council's staggering army of four and a half thousand rapidly assembled volunteers in response to wave 1 of the pandemic, many other London boroughs sit in awe of those accomplishments. I also know that I am not alone amongst Members in feeling very proud of the length the Council staff are going to during these unprecedented times to help see us through this ongoing crisis, and I thank all those involved on behalf of all Members.

Supplementary Question:

Please accept that this is in no way a criticism of our staff – I applaud our staff and accept that they are working way beyond their normal jobs, but that is the very point. I would like to know how many staff you have actually talked to, because a number of them will openly tell you that they are not able to do their day jobs, and that is clearly costing the Council. I was asking the question how much the financial opportunity cost was, which has not been answered, and can I also ask if any of these staff have been compelled to work outside their normal hours to try to do their day jobs alongside the work in response to Covid?

Reply:

I do not know what part of none Councillor Wilkins did not think the answer to the was was, but let me repeat it for her. The Chief Executive is very clear, the staff are happily volunteering to perform these extra functions, not least because many of the Council staff live here, which rather sets us out as a borough and makes them very special. It is a borderline unique attribute of Bromley's which I am very proud to be a part of.

(At this point Cllr Wilkins protested that her question had not been answered, and in a point of personal explanation requested that the Leader should not patronise her.)

3. From Cllr Ian Dunn to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing:

In the past three months two papers, for the Redevelopment of Chislehurst Library and the Energy Services Contract were initially published as Part 2 (Confidential) only, in spite of substantial public interest in both of these papers. It was only after significant pressure from Councillors and members of the public that Part 1 (Public) versions were published, containing the vast majority of information in the original papers.

Why were these Part 1 (Public) papers not published with the original meeting agendas?

Reply:

In both cases the contents of the papers related to commercially sensitive information regarding pricing and bid submissions which are normally debated in a Part 2 format. Following publication of the reports the position was reviewed and it was decided that in both cases the decisions in principle could be taken in a Part 1 format and subsequently Part 1 Reports were issued. This model is regularly applied to contract reports and a similar approach is now being taken for property reports. It should be noted that it is an officer decision to decide whether or not to place a report in Part 1 or Part 2 and a Member decision on whether it considers the report in Part 1 or Part 2.

Supplementary Question:

Why were these public papers not published initially, and what are you going to do to make sure that this does not happen again?

Reply:

As far as the last part of that is concerned, I answered that in my original answer, and we have said that in the future a similar approach of trying to put it all in part 1 is being taken for property reports. Why wasn't it part 1 in the first place? It was an officer decision, they made that decision – if we make it again we will make a different decision.

4. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing:

Could the Portfolio Holder please explain on what basis the eligibility criteria for applications to the Bromley Welfare Fund were set and when they were last renewed?

Reply:

The Welfare Fund eligibility criteria was adopted by the Executive in October 2019 to provide essential household iitems to set up home in the community for those households who are on low income and/or experiencing financial hardship who could not otherwise afford essential household items. The Scheme has been kept under annual review to ensure effective use of funds to support those most vulnerable financially excluded households as this is a finite pot of money – as such no material

changes have been made to the elegibility critieria during this time. The full policy setting out eleigibility criteria can be found on our website:

https://www.bromley.gov.uk/downloads/file/1634/bromley_welfare_fund

Supplementary Question:

Is he aware that many families are ineligible to claim under the Welfare Fund on the basis that they have lived in the property for longer than eight weeks, and if appliances like cookers and fridges break down they cannot be covered by the Welfare Fund. Would he commit to reviewing this eligibility criteria particularly on the basis that under current circumstances the pandemic is creating great hardship for families in the borough?

Reply:

I will commit to do that – I will speak to my officers and see if there is any basis to make it better for them.

5. From CIIr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation & Housing:

One of my recent caseworks concerned an elderly couple who are now homeless because they refused to be relocated from Penge to Gravesend. Can the Council's policy be amended to ensure elderly local residents are not moved away from their support networks to these remote locations?

Reply:

Sadly I cannot make an absolute guarantee. There is an insufficient supply of affordable, local, self-contained temporary accommodation. Taking into account all known and relevant facts officers will endeavour and do endeavour to place all households within, or as close as possible to, the London Borough of Bromley. Our approach is set out in our Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy (link to the website below). Due to the numbers of households requiring temporary accommodation, whilst we make every effort to keep all vulnerable people as close as possible to their existing family and friends and to place every applicant in borough as we would wish it is not always possible and it would not be practical to amend the policy in the manner suggested as we do not have access to sufficient accommodation to deliver on such an approach. We hope that our Housing Strategy will be instrumental in helping us on the supply side by increasing the number of affordable homes that are delivered in the borough. We also continue to focus on taking preventative action to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place wherever possible.

https://cds.bromley.gov.uk/documents/s50035837/App.%202%20for%20Updated%20Temporary%20Accommodation%20Procurement%20Strategy%20and%20Placement%20Policy.pdf

Supplementary Question:

How many authorisation levels are required before making such remote, one-only offers to Bromley residents of all ages?

Reply:

I do not know the answer to that question, but I will discover and let you know by email.

6. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Given the Government's announcement that the purchase of new petrol and diesel cars will be banned from 2030 what is the Council doing to accelerate the provision of publicly accessible charging points for electric vehicles?

Reply:

Following the initial issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council will shortly be restarting its installation programme for public electric vehicle charging points. Locations will be decided based on demand and projected usage in conjunction with the Council's preferred delivery partner – Source London.

The Council will also continue to work in conjunction with Transport for London and strive to install 'Rapid' charge points when possible and where appropriate. This follows the successful deployment of such points in Nichol Lane, Bromley, Main Road, Biggin Hill and Maple Road Penge.

However, as with all emerging and fast-moving technologies, the Council is fully aware of potential obsolescence and bears this in mind with all schemes. Especially given the Government's recent announcement and the impact this is likely to have on existing fuel providers. It is worth noting for instance that Source London's parent company Bluepoint, has recently been purchased by Total.

Supplementary Question:

Does the Portfolio Holder agree that having public charging points is important to the future of the borough so that it is a destination for shopping and business and not somewhere which people pass through, and that the provision of a variety of charging points, including trickle and rapid are provided?

Reply:

I think as you alluded to there are different reasons for different types of charging points, but in particular for people who might visit the borough to have charge points. We have rapid charge points, the fast charge points installed by Bluepoint, however a number of points installed some years ago seem to be unused, probably due to the obsolescence issue that I previously mentioned.

Additional Supplementary question from CIIr Simon Fawthrop:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that Cllr King, on numerous occasions when there has been applications at Planning Committees to provide electric car charging points, has voted against?

Reply:

I was not particularly aware of them.

7. From Cllr Kevin Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Would the Portfolio Holder please outline the Council's strategy on leaf clearance? Are there multiple clearances or is the policy to wait until all leaves have fallen?

Reply:

The Council has an established methodology for autumn leaf clearance that has been developed over a number of years. This programme involves the Service Provider, Veolia, who clear leafing from the borough's highways as part of their street cleaning duties, and idverde who clear leafing from greenspaces and local parks. Both service providers have pre-prepared programmes of leafing removal that are agreed with client officers in preparation for the seasons event.

During the autumn months, Veolia employ additional seasonal resources over a 12-week period, that work in conjunction with and are supplementary to the routine street cleansing operations. The programme is drawn up in a dynamic manner, utilising datasets from previous leafing programmes, and information from our Arboriculture team regarding streets with tree canopy coverage that was based upon an aerial photography exercise which captured trees on both public and private land. With local knowledge fed in from our Neighbourhood Officers and public/Member enquiries, the programmes of leafing removal are reviewed annually to ensure it is as up to date as possible. Dependent on local needs, some streets will have several attendances across the period, subject to the anticipated timing of their expected leaf fall. So far this season over a thousand tonnes of leafing material has been collected for recycling.

Supplementary Question:

This came from an enquiry from a resident living in Oakfield Road in Penge. They had been indoors in the lock-in, and they said that they had not seen anyone go down their road collecting any leaves for over month – I wondered whether you felt this was usual, especially as when I visited the road leaves were clogging up the drains?

Reply:

As I indicated, we do have a programme that is supplementary to street cleansing. Ttypically, depending on the road and the number of trees, leaves are collected by the normal street cleansing operation and some by additional rounds, based on the tree canopy, to collect the largest bulk of leaves.

8. From Cllr Simon Fawthrop to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Has the Portfolio Holder read the report in the Economics and Human Biology Journal which demonstrates that cycle lanes are on the whole poor value for money, and that if spending increased at the same rate for the next 10 years there would only be a 1% increase in commuter cycling.

Reply:

Thank you for drawing my attention to this paper. I am now aware of the paper and so far have read the summary. I note that one of the pape's conclusions was that "More research is necessary to determine whether such investment in cycling infrastructure constitutes good or equitable value for money." Another conclusion was that there was a strong correlation between spend on cycle infrastructure and increases in commuter cycling, arriving at a figure of less than £5K per additional commuter cycling. As Cllr Fawthrop and I regularly state when commenting on reliance of PTALs in planning, of course commuting is not the only reason residents and visitors travel and we also support residents to travel for essentials and leisure. Many of our LIP funded schemes are not just aimed at cyclists but also at pedestrians which was not considered in this report.

Given the many suggestions that there will be a new normal following this pandemic, it would be particularly brave to predict future trends even based on past data.

In the summer the Government published "Gear change: a bold vision for cycling and walking", which sets out a comprehensive, long term vision. This may well form part of a future Environment and Community Services PDS Policy Development activity so it is directed to be most relevant to our Borough.

There needs to be a balanced investment in our streets as we all rely on them for our travel.

Supplementary Question:

Just putting in context that reply, has he also read the recent report from Wandsworth Council that shows that where they introduced low traffic neighbourhoods, on eleven cases out of eleven when they took the low traffic neighbourhoods away air pollution actually got better?

Reply:

I am aware of that research. I do note the comment; I also note that some of the warnings that were linked to that data related to the limited period of time that the data was collected. There are many reasons why any borough will implement road schemes and air poluution may be one of them but not the only one, bearing in mind that there is road safety, amongst others.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Ian Dunn:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that there is other research that shows that cycle schemes give very strong returns to society and I would like to ask what he is going to do to ensure that Bromley gets as much money as possible to enhance the cycling facilities in the borough for the benefit of our residents?

Reply:

As Councillor Dunn knows, as he sits on Environment and Community Services PDS Committee, it is not only down to myself it is up to the policy development activity of this borough to determine which schemes are most appropriate for the London Borough of Bromley context. We have always developed schemes which are

supported by Members and fit our London Borough of Bromley context and that will continue to be the case.

Urgent question from CIIr Melanie Stevens to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

In light of the Government's announcements on 23 November, can the Portfolio Holder explain what he is doing to find the reasonable and short term sum of money, £5K per month, requested by Mytime Active to re-open the Biggin Hill swimming pool.

The re-opening of the pool surely fits within the Government's policy particularly relating to obesity, and this administration's strategy of maintaining and supporting the health and well being of local communities. This community extends and includes Darwin Ward, parts of Bromley Common & Keston Ward and Chelsfield & Pratts Bottom Ward as well as Biggin Hill Ward.

Reply:

This is obviously an important issue and that is why an urgent question has been allowed. Mytime have undertaken a review of the financial implications of Lockdown 2.0 and new arrangements for phased re-opening under recently announced tier 2 restrictions. The impact of COVID has had a significant impact upon all leisure providers and the outlook still remains uncertain. At this stage I confirm that there is no specific request for financial support in relation to the reopening of any particular site and Mytime are currently working to plan a phased re-opening for all sites. However any wider request for support across the leisure portfolio as a whole may come forward in due course for consideration and is likely to continue to be reviewed due to the uncertainty and changing nature of the current situation.

Supplementary Question:

Can you confirm there is no foreseeable date on which the pool at Biggin Hill will be re-opening?

Reply:

They have given us a date, but due to all the uncertainties I hesitate to announce it in public to give people false hope. I am extremely hopeful that it will not be too long.

9. From Cllr Nicholas Bennett to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

What consultation did Transport for London and neighbouring local authorities undertake with the Council regarding the closure of streets and the narrowing of roads during the summer of 2020?

Reply:

In the Summer of 2020, Transport for London did not undertake any consultation with the London Borough of Bromley, save to inform us that they were to be introducing social distancing measures in West Wickham High Street, which forms part of the Transport for London Road Network.

Bromley was also informed, rather than consulted, by the London Borough of Croydon that they were introducing a Low Traffic Neighbourhood on the border with Bromley in Crystal Palace.

Supplementary Question:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that it was the combined efforts of the ward councillors and Gareth Bacon, our GLA Member, that got the barriers removed from certain parts of West Wickham High Street after they had put them up firstly by one of our electric charging points and secondly blocking off the disabled bays. Can he explain how it helps cyclists to narrow the roads so that they are put into closer proximity to other vehicles?

Reply:

It is not really for me to explain how TfL came to that decision. Their decision-making is often quite mysterious, as we have seen throughout the summer. I do believe that TfL were responsive to adjusting the scheme in West Wickham High Street in certain respects. I would correct him that it was not one of our charging points – it was one of TfL's own charging points, but the point is well made.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Angela Wilkins:

Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me and recognise that TfL are only responsible for their own roads, so consulting is not really a relevant question – it is somewhat spurious. In the case of Crystal Palace, would he also agree with me that the only road for which TfL are responsible is the A212 and none of Bromley's roads that form part of that category are part of the low traffic neighbourhood in that area?

Reply:

We would normally expect TfL to consult us before they implement changes on their roads, not least because of the impact that it may have on our roads. TfL do typically consult us, for example, before making changes at particular lights. As far as TfL roads outside our borough are concerned, that is not something that I am fully familiar with as the only two roads in our borough are the A232 and the A21.

Cllr Colin Smith added that Cllr Wilkins' point that the Croydon roads immediately adjacent to the Bromley roads that are affected is taken. I think she overlooks the fact that Fox Hill is in both boroughs so it is not true to say that no Bromley roads are included in the low traffic neighbourhood put in by Croydon with no consultation.

(At this point the time allowed for questions expired and written replies were provided for the remainder of the questions.)

10. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Care and Health

Is this Council going to be one of those trialling mass testing?

Reply:

Officers have confirmed that Bromley is a local authority participating in the pilot of the "Asymptomatic Targeted Testing Programme."

11. From Cllr Ian Dunn to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Information provided at the November meeting of the Environment & Community Services PDS Committee showed no downward movement in the number of people killed or seriously injured on Bromley's roads over the last three years. What will the Portfolio Holder do to get this number moving firmly downwards in the coming years?

Reply:

The long-term trend remains downward, with the council's education and engineering programmes supporting this. The award-winning education programme will continue to target road users, particularly the most vulnerable, whilst engineering measures have focussed on casualty cluster sites where maximum collisions might be prevented.

I agree that after three years of little downward movement in the number of serious road injuries in the Borough, there is no room for complacency and the Council's Traffic and Road Safety teams will be continuing to focus on maximising casualty reduction. Sadly, this lack of downward movement in the number of serious injuries and deaths on the roads, over recent years, is also reflected nationally and across London.

12. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Following the Government's announcement of an additional £175 million for councils to provide walking and cycling infrastructure, how does Bromley Council plan to consult local communities, as required as part of the conditions for schemes, and when will this consultation process begin?

Reply:

The Council continues to invest in targeted walking and cycling infrastructure and will continue to consult affected residents and road users as part of each proposal, to ensure that the best solutions are implemented. This may mean that some schemes take many months to come to fruition, but Bromley would rather install schemes that will be well used and supported.

In respect to the recently installed emergency active travel measures, these are experimental in nature which means that the consultation for these is very much ongoing.

13. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Leader of the Council

The Metropolitan Police are taking bold steps to recruit more black police officers and ensure that institutional racism is wiped out in the police force. Can you advise if Bromley Council are undertaking any work or additional training to ensure that the diversity of our communities are reflected?

Reply:

I can advise that Bromley Council employs ~24% of its staff from BAME communities compared to ~ 22% of the population.

14. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation & Housing

Will the Portfolio Holder endorse the End our Cladding Campaign organised by Inside Housing and The Sunday Times?

https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/end-our-cladding-scandal-campaign-relaunches-with-10-step-plan-to-tackle-mounting-crisis-68020

Reply:

We are not about to join a national pressure group or endorse a campaign but we are supportive of local residents facing this situation. It is a matter of public record that the Council was in contact with Government to ask for funding for local residents to enable cladding to be removed, which did come forward. As Bromley Town Councillors are aware, the Council has kept in contact with their local residents about this and Sir Bob Neill MP has continued to raise this matter in parliament, which is the correct forum for this matter to be discussed.

15. From Cllr Kevin Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Care and Health

Over the last few years and accelerated under Covid, the number of respite centres in Bromley has dramatically decreased. While praise must go to Bromley Well, they have been overwhelmed and therefore their support is limited. What are the Council doing to improve respite for the large number of Bromley Carers?

Reply:

I am not familiar with the assertion that Bromley Well is overwhelmed and limited in the support they can offer. As with everyone else they are certainly busy in responding to the pressures of Covid but no one from Bromley Well has advised officers that they are overwhelmed.

It is right to say that recent changes have led to a reduction in the number of day centres providing respite for older people and adults with disabilities. Prior to Covid our residents who use these services, whether funded by the Council or whether self-funding, were increasingly choosing not to use day centres in favour of other forms of respite and short breaks.

I do however accept that the closure of buildings-based day and respite services due to Covid has put pressure on carers and that some carers are finding it difficult. In response to the Covid pressures which have clearly compounded this difficulty the Council has acted to support residents and respite providers in a number of ways:

Carers and residents have been offered and taken up Direct Payments so they
might purchase respite support independently and away from indoor group
activities.

- Providers with block contracts to deliver respite services have continued to be paid whilst their day centres are closed.
- In all cases respite and other day support providers have continued to keep in touch with their customers and deliver a range of support where possible to carers and those they care for.

For Members information I asked the Director of Adult Services and the Director of Public Health several weeks ago to support the reopening of day centres on a limited basis in order that respite support can be provided along with support to people who might otherwise be living in isolation. This will be subject to providers being able to meet standards set by the Director of Public Health and will be in line with the government guidance on Covid published last month.

Looking to the future the Council has a number of plans in train to develop respite services. These will be developed with people that currently use services, their carers and providers.

Appendix 1 (question 1)

Total Debt by London Borough Council as at 30/9/20

	Borough	Total Debt £000
1	Croydon	1,521,501
2	Barking & Dagenham	946,746
3	Enfield	927,884
4	Newham	818,202
5	Southwark	809,134
6	Ealing	663,400
7	Lambeth	591,658
8	Haringey	514,443
9	Brent	508,679
10	Harrow	422,261
11	Barnet	394,080
12	Greenwich	378,109
13	Islington	370,109
14	Waltham Forest	351,558
15	Redbridge	330,740
16	Sutton	329,521
17	Camden	329,436
18	Kingston upon Thames	307,376
19	Hillingdon	290,568
20	Hammersmith & Fulham	283,142
21	Kensington & Chelsea	263,832
22	Havering	240,585
23	Bexley	227,971
24	Westminster	221,166
25	Lewisham	213,120
26	Hounslow	205,850
27	Richmond upon Thames	134,048
28	Hackney	121,886
29	Merton	113,010
30	Tower Hamlets	72,289
31	Wandsworth	61,456
32	Bromley	0

Source: MHCLG Quarterly Statistics

Total External Interest Paid during 2018-191

1016	Borough	Interest Paid £000
1	Newham	46,668
2	Lewisham	26,796
3	Lambeth	26,183
4	Ealing	23,369
5	Croydon	22,639
6	Tower Hamlets	21,907
7	Waltham Forest	20,925
8	Brent	20,680
9	Harrow	19,542
10	Barking & Dagenham	19,529
11	Greenwich	16,695
12	Haringey	16,249
13	Kensington & Chelsea	11,776
14	Kingston upon Thames	10,887
15	Bexley	9,982
16	Hounslow	9,142
17	Redbridge	9,109
18	Havering	7,802
19	Hackney	7,789
20	Enfield	7,604
21	Southwark	6,863
22	Merton	6,315
23	Barnet	5,011
24	Wandsworth	4,945
25	Richmond upon Thames	4,360
26	Islington	3,031
27	Hillingdon	1,695
28	Westminster	1,381
29	Hammersmith & Fulham	1,291
30	Sutton	940
31	Camden	711
32	Bromley	0

Source: MHCLG Quarterly Statistics

_

¹ This is the last year for which a full dataset is currently available