

COUNCIL MEETING

19th April 2021

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL FOR ORAL REPLY

1. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education & Families

What information does he have concerning levels of domestic abuse since the beginning of lockdown in 2020 until now?

Reply:

We gather information on domestic abuse in the borough via a number of sources and agencies, including Bromley Children's Project, Bromley and Croydon Women's Aid, the Metropolitan Police and any referrals that we get from the MASH. Each supplies data in its own way, but it is sadly the case that levels of domestic violence abuse do appear to have increased during the lockdown. This was not unexpected, unfortunately, and officers have continued to work to support those impacted by this most heinous abuse.

2. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection & Enforcement

There are a number of static beggars operating in the borough sitting outside cash machines or popular shops. Even with the COVID lockdown they appear free to operate in this way. Is this considered anti-social behaviour (ASB) and is there intervention to assist those in need and enforcement for the criminal beggars?

Reply:

Begging would normally be considered a Police matter which can be dealt with under the Vagrancy Act 1824, which has the power of arrest should the Police deem it appropriate. It is considered to be anti-social behaviour and Council officers do undertake targeted joint High Street patrols with the Police when begging issues are highlighted as and when required and when appropriate resources are available to do so.

LBB Public Protection Officers have a remit to deal with alleged breaches of COVID regulations by businesses, but alleged Covid breaches by people in general (which includes beggars) is a Police matter, and all reports should be made to the Police via 101 in the usual way.

Supplementary question:

I have on several occasions raised a particular incident where a beggar who is housed, so he is not a vagrant, is selling things and asking people to put money on his electric card. I have raised this with our local Police as anti-social behaviour, and they say they are working on it, but this has been several months and he is still free to do this daily.

Sometimes he walks to the location, sometimes he uses a mobility vehicle, so I just wondered if this could be raised with our Police for more stringent action, where it is clearly a criminal beggar?

Reply:

Yes, certainly, if you send me the details I will follow that up.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Alexa Michael:

As a regular visitor and shopper in Bromley town centre, I have noticed lately that there are beggars begging around bus stops when people are waiting for buses, demanding money, sometimes quite forcibly. Could I ask the Portfolio Holder if she will raise this with the local Police so that this anti-social behaviour can be dealt with?

Reply:

Yes, of course I will.

3. From Cllr Vanessa Allen to the Leader of the Council

In the interests of public engagement and openness, will the Leader agree to continue live streaming of Council Meetings, including PDSs, sub-committees, panels etc. after we return to face to face meetings?

Reply:

It is not in my gift to set rules for Council, PDS and general Council Committees.

That decision falls to the general membership. I would anticipate this question being directed to the General Purposes & Licensing Committee to consider with a Council decision being needed if any Constitutional change were deemed necessary.

I should imagine that the answer will boil down to evidenced public demand versus the cost of providing the additional service, but that would be to second guess the Committee's thoughts and eventual recommendation.

Supplementary question:

As a member of General Purposes & Licensing Committee I would be more than happy to raise it, but that will probably be after we return to in-person meetings. We know that we have had more people watching these meetings, or some of them, at least, than we have ever had in the public gallery. It would be helpful if the Leader could support this, and could see it as a force for good in the borough.

Reply:

I am not on the General Purposes & Licensing Committee so that would be me telling them what to do. It will be a question for the General Purposes & Licensing Committee.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Simon Fawthrop:

Is the Leader aware that the evidence on this is quite mixed, and does he agree with me that when it does go back to General Purposes & Licensing Committee they should consider all the evidence before rushing into a decision?

Reply:

I would certainly agree that all Members should consider all the evidence before they make any decision, so I do endorse that. It will be interesting to see the statistics in due course. The evidence is patchy, from what I have seen, but again, this is for General Purposes & Licensing Committee to determine not for me to instruct.

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

A number of local authorities have suffered damaging cyber-attacks over the past 12 months, what action has the Council taken in response to improve the cyber security of our IT systems?

Reply:

The Council enhanced its IT security as a part of the recent IT transformation programme and we successfully dealt with recent threats and challenges without service interruption.

But, there is no room for complacency and as well as a programme of continuous improvement to our security systems we are working with government agencies to learn from both current best practice and issues which arose elsewhere to anticipate and protect against potential future vulnerabilities.

The problems faced by Cheltenham, Hackney and others have served to prompt forensic systems examination by all Councils and the detailed reports that are emerging from Hackney, shared by their Finance Director, Ian Williams, have proved to be of great value. The way in which the attack of last October was dealt with has rightly led to them being shortlisted for a national award, as indeed, so have we.

Supplementary question:

The Portfolio Holder will be aware that the Harris Federation has suffered a very sophisticated ransom-ware attack which brought down a number of its systems including email and phone lines. Can he provide assurance that the Council is engaging with academies and other public bodies across the borough to ensure that their systems are also protected against attacks, particularly where sensitive data such as our residents' medical records is concerned.

Reply:

It is difficult to give that assurance, because every organisation will be doing their own security checks, but we do liaise with all the key players across the borough and explain what we are doing, and the work being done by Mr Shukle and his team is really exceptionally good. I will have a word with him tomorrow about whether we can spin it across to academies. I will check with him and I will come back to Councillor Jeal with further details.

(Councillor Simon Fawthrop declared an interest at this point with regards to questions about IT, as he was employed by BT.)

5. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

A recent report by the BBC (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56510107>) indicates that in Bromley less than 20% of rough sleepers helped by the 'Everyone In' campaign are now in settled or supported accommodation. Why has Bromley performed so badly in comparison with other local authorities and what is being done to improve the Borough's performance in the future?

Reply:

The report by the BBC does not, unfortunately, provide a full picture. The key is understanding the term "Emergency Housing." The article has combined emergency accommodation placements such as hotel and hostel accommodation with genuinely decent self-contained accommodation which is spot purchased from the private sector. In Bromley, like the majority of boroughs, rough sleepers accommodated under the 'Everyone in' campaign were initially placed into hotel rooms due to the emergency situation. Since this time the vast majority have been assisted to move-on to suitable accommodation with only 7% (that is six people) currently remaining in hotel/hostel accommodation. While not all such accommodation may be "settled" in the sense meant in the article it is self-contained and suitable (flats or studios) available in the longer term for households, and thus very different from a hotel room. It is quite possible that other local authorities have reported accommodation types in different ways and indeed many have far greater numbers in hotels and hostels than is the case in Bromley. Unfortunately the BBC report did not look at that aspect and suitability of accommodation and support provided. So we now have a total of 94 identified, although we only had 12 rough sleepers before Covid. 71 are in settled accommodation that we have put them into, 26 have found their own accommodation leaving the 7% I spoke about, with one person sleeping rough by their own choice – they have been offered accommodation. Additionally, the Council has made a bid for funding under the Rough Sleepers Initiative, which, alongside funds we have already received, will assist in our efforts to source suitable long term settled accommodation.

Supplementary question from Councillor Angela Wilkins:

Do the figures you have just given include people who are camping in make-shift tents in various parks particularly in Crystal Palace Park and Betts Park.

Reply:

No, I am not aware of the numbers of people sleeping in tents in parks, or why they are there, but having heard that question I will get my officers to have a look at that issue.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Kathy Bance: (in writing)

More powers are being given to outreach rough sleepers to manage those who will not engage. Does our homeless team see this as a positive and will those powers assist with long term rough sleepers?

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

What action is the Council taking to ensure that it will be able to deal with all applications to register historic rights of way in a timely manner, given the deadline for doing this of 2026?

Reply:

The Council will ensure that resources are available to process applications within the required timeframe.

Supplementary question:

Can you tell me how you will ensure that these resources are available?

Reply:

Through the normal management and budgetary processes.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Vanessa Allen:

Given that the Rights of Way Sub-Committee has not met for several years it might be appropriate for them to look at this?

Reply:

The Rights of Way Sub-Committee generally only meets consider when rights of way need to be changed. I suspect that, as we get towards the date and there is a reason to evaluate the applications for rights of way, in other words to judge whether they are rights of way or not, that is when the Rights of Way Sub-Committee will want to get involved. At the moment we are not at that position.

7. From Cllr Kevin Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families

Beckenham Harris Secondary School have made the decision to prioritise Beckenham Harris Primary School pupils for its new admissions policy. Whilst acknowledging the Portfolio Holder has limited decision making due to London Borough of Bromley academisation, will he agree that the school's decision sets a dangerous precedent and that it is worrying for the parents, pupils and staff of independent junior schools?

Reply:

I am very grateful that Cllr Brooks recognises that the Council is not the admissions authority for the Harris Academy Beckenham, or any of the other secondary schools in the borough. It has long been a challenge of mine to make Members appreciate that the Council does not run the schools, and there is every chance that this is my final meeting as Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families it is nice to know that the message is getting across. His question asks if a new precedent will be set: I do not believe it will. There are numerous precedents for the creation of feeder schools, both within Bromley and in neighbouring boroughs.

Supplementary question:

There does seem to have been, not only on this one but, a couple of years ago with Langley Park School for Boys, a feeling from residents of this borough not to support feeder schools. Would the Portfolio Holder, or whoever may come next if this is his last meeting, want to at least get the message across to academies that residents are not supportive of feeder schools.

Reply:

The Education Department has expressed its opposition to the creation of feeder schools because it restricts choice for parents through reducing the number of open places available, which is all determined on proximity. What the local authority will do with each of these applications that comes in is that it assesses the information, it takes a factual appreciation of the situation on the ground and then it makes its recommendation to the Schools Adjudicator. As I have said, our concern is to make sure that there is sufficient school places available and so often in the past we have written to the Adjudicator to say that we oppose those feeder schools.

It is also why we are working to make sure that we get that proper expansion so we that we have suitable places. Councillor Brooks will know that we have got early approval from the DfE to open a new school and the plan is to open that in Penge in the Kent House area and work is progressing with that. So, hopefully there will be lots more places available in that area of the borough.

8. From Cllr Kieran Terry to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

As non-essential shops start to open following lockdown, how is the Council supporting our High Streets during the re-opening process?

Reply:

In anticipation of the re-opening of our high streets, the Council has been working for some weeks with businesses and the borough's Business Improvement Districts to put in place a range of support measures to help our local businesses re-open safely. These have included a new website especially designed to offer guidance and support for safe opening, the opportunity for individual consultations and resources for businesses to display at point of sale, provided in collaboration with retail experts SE1Media and our own public protection officers who will be visiting premises to give advice and ensure compliance.

We have also launched a public facing campaign to let shoppers know what is in place, encourage them to 'shop local' and to ask them to play their own part in a safe return to the high street through social distancing and appropriate wearing of face coverings. New signage is being rolled out across all shopping areas, with messages around social distancing and hand washing to support this and we are managing pavement licence applications to allow traders more space to trade. We also continue on a daily basis to liaise with large retailers around queue management and this will continue for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, we are delivering Restart Grants to support businesses as they reopen, as well as a range of discretionary grants to support businesses remobilise safely.

This sits alongside the many business support grants that have been distributed during lockdown. Our high streets have also benefited from enhanced cleaning regimes delivered by colleagues in Environment in preparation for the reopening.

Supplementary question:

Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that residents, subject to doing so in a covid-secure way, should take the opportunity over the next couple of days to get out in the sunshine and support our local shops and businesses?

Reply:

I do, and I have been to the High Street in Bromley and it is like a Christmas Saturday. What does concern me is that people continue to remember the rules about social distancing and wearing masks. This is vitally important – the last thing the economy needs whether in Bromley or nationally is another lockdown, and if we do not take care that will happen.

9. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Now that you have finally become active in LB Croydon's proposals for a Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) in Crystal Palace, please provide an update on what mitigations you are considering on Bromley roads to protect residents of Cintra Park and Milestone & Patterson Roads.

Reply:

Executive members and officers of the Council have been fully involved with responding to the unwanted LTN from the first minute Bromley became aware of Croydon's plans. We have been involved and on the side of residents throughout and unlike former Councillor Ahmad and yourself, we haven't sat on the fence. We have pressed Croydon to remove the barriers that were pushing huge amounts of traffic onto these narrow residential streets. If Croydon had involved us from the beginning we like to think we would have saved residents from all the negative impacts and stress that residents experienced last year. Since Croydon removed the barriers there has been much relief for those Bromley residents.

The Council is not presuming that the LTN will ever be implemented. The consultation Croydon completed on Croydon's proposed scheme showed the majority opposed it; Bromley has also highlighted its many failings. Given its proximity to our Borough, and in the absence of our support, we expect the proposed scheme will eventually be referred to the Mayor for adjudication.

We will be making representations to the Mayor on behalf of Crystal Palace residents living on both sides of the Borough boundary in continued opposition to this ill-conceived scheme if it does.

Supplementary question:

I would like to refute the idea that Councillor Ahmad and I have sat on the fence on this – that is a long way from the truth. What we have said from the beginning is that this is a cross-borough matter and it needs a cross-borough solution. You are assuming that Croydon is not going to be proceeding with this, but we are all aware

that what Croydon is doing is based on legislation passed by this Conservative government. The impact on Milestone, Patterson and Cintra Roads was unquestionably unacceptable and I have made that crystal clear from day one. What would you do if this is what Croydon proceed to do? Consultations are difficult beasts at the best of times, the question is, if this proceeds what would you do?

Reply:

I do not think I would like to proceed on hypotheticals. I do not expect this scheme to continue in the form that I have recently seen proposed. My current understanding is that the Deputy Mayor for Cycling and Walking has previously expressed comments that would suggest that there are some aspects of the proposal that he would not like to see in the scheme because they do not deliver his objectives. So I would not expect the scheme to be delivered in its current guise. On that basis I would not expect it to be delivered at all. There are a number of hurdles for it to go through and I expect it to be modified. I do not see how it is possible to deliver an answer on hypotheticals.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Simon Fawthrop:

Has the Portfolio Holder seen or been given sight of any correspondence between Bromley Labour Party and Croydon Labour Party asking for this scheme to be scrapped, or objecting to the scheme?

Reply:

That was correspondence that was not to me, so I do not think I would have seen it.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Kieran Terry:

Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that the real cause of this issue is the dreadful LTN scheme imposed by Labour-run Croydon Council, with funding approved by Labour-run TfL, with no consultation with Bromley Council or with residents, and to truly support residents affected by this Councillor Wilkins should be joining Conservative members in both Bromley and Croydon asking for this to be removed altogether?

Reply:

I would agree with that. Following our pressure, and there were also other court cases, the scheme is currently being removed and I will continue to support that.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Tony Owen:

Does the Portfolio Holder think that there is anything to learn from Harrow Council who are thinking of scrapping four Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and three new cycle lanes after a consultation found most residents opposed them.

Reply:

I have seen a report that you forwarded to me on what Harrow is looking at. I would certainly encourage Councils to listen to residents and look at schemes before they do that. Bromley's schemes have been supported by residents.

10. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection & Enforcement

With the police and a government task force looking to make our streets safer for all, will you re-consider installing additional CCTV in Bromley's serious crime locations?

Reply:

All requests for new CCTV must be accompanied by a Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA) with supporting data from the Police. Should the Police consider an area to require CCTV surveillance, they will submit a PIA that establishes that the surveillance activity has a proper legal basis, that is undertaken in accordance with the law, and that the activity is justified and necessary to address a pressing need.

Supplementary question:

What if any action is Bromley doing to make our parks and streets safer for everyone, apart from advising people not to use our parks after dark.

Reply:

As you know, we are currently having a CCTV review, reviewing the position of all our cameras in the borough, and whether some of them can be moved to other areas. Rob Vale has a meeting coming up very soon with the Penge BID to discuss the cameras in Penge so if you would like to feed into that process please feel free to email him.