

Council - 18th October 2021

Questions from members of the public for oral reply

1. From Tim Webb to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

Crofton Road Cycle Lanes and related developments - is this really value for money, with potholes in roads perhaps a more pressing issue?

Reply:

As part of the scheme, Crofton Road was always going to be resurfaced as potholes were occurring due to the age of the road surface. The project was supported three times by the Environment and Community Services PDS Committee of nine Councillors and by a wide resident consultation demonstrating that it was considered a good use of public money and therefore value for money in their eyes.

Supplementary Question:

What was the total cost of the development?

Reply:

I am sorry, I do not have that figure to hand, but it is published in the PDS Committee report on the Council website and has been given in response to other questions. We can forward a link to you.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Fawthrop

Councillor Huntington-Thresher said in his reply that the scheme was value for money in the eyes of the Committee. Is he aware that, in the eyes of the Petts Wood and Knoll Councillors it was not. In his own opinion, does he feel it is value for money?

Reply:

There have been three votes taken in support of this scheme – that is the position of this Council.

2. From Tim Webb to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

The bus lay-bys have all been removed, causing traffic delays and tailbacks opposite Orpington Station. What is the logic behind this please and who carried out a risk assessment?

Reply:

There were no bus lay-bys on this section of the road prior to the cycling and walking scheme being implemented. Traffic queues past Orpington Station have been a frequent occurrence as long as I can remember, particularly at peak times. A road safety audit of the design has been undertaken and no safety concerns have been raised. Increased bus driver changeovers are now occurring at the bus stop opposite the station and we are demanding that TfL reduce or stop bus driver changeovers at this stop.

The first post implementation road safety audit has been completed. At the request of Councillor Christopher Marlow, ward councillor, a post-implementation review will be reported to the November Environment and Community Services PDS Committee meeting.

Supplementary Question:

Have any audits ever been carried out as to how many cyclists are using the cycle lanes?

Reply:

I do not believe that we have completed any counts as yet, because we would normally leave a cycle lane in for longer before we count and expect to see residents responding to the choices available. Residents will take time to take advantage of these new facilities and change their mode of transport. It is normal practice for that sort of review to be undertaken nine months to a year after implementation has been finished.

3. From Richard Honess to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

In 2002 Bromley Council were given £270,000 of Government funding to convert the Rookery Gardens Estate into a Home Zone. Considerable improvements were made which were very much welcomed at the time. What have the Council done to maintain the condition of this Estate?

Reply:

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Officers in Environment and Community Services are currently assessing what works may need to be undertaken to improve the current condition and ensure ongoing maintenance.

Supplementary Question:

I pass through that estate on a very regular basis and I have spoken to residents there. I found it to be in a dilapidated and disgusting condition, with overflowing bins on the street, the smell of rotting waste. It is attracting rodents and dumping of domestic waste

is everywhere, there is damage to street furniture and the children's play area is in a major state of disrepair and is unusable. Residents were telling me that they were embarrassed to live there and feeling like they were abandoned by the Council, with their complaints not being addressed. How has this been allowed to happen and what are the proposals to rectify that situation?

Reply:

The ball has been dropped between the paving stones – the housing association own the estate and we thought that they owned the playground and we thought they did. That is what has happened, and for that we apologise. It is now going to be rectified and we will ensure that it is fit for purpose in the future.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Angela Wilkins:

Cllr Morgan stated that the Council was looking at what needed to be done. Could he just confirm that nothing has been done since 2002?

Reply:

Not having been a councillor since 2002 I cannot comment on that, but clearly nothing has been done for some time and we are planning to rectify the situation.

4. From Tony McPartlan to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

A number of housing association tenants that I know have a growing list of maintenance and safety fixes needed, which are being ignored. What is the Council doing to hold housing associations to account and ensure that they are providing a good service to the people of Bromley?

Reply:

The performance of Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) is scrutinised by the Homes and Communities Agency and the Housing Ombudsman. In accordance with the Private Rented Sector Housing Enforcement Policy, the Council will not normally take action against an RSL, unless and until the problem in question has been properly reported to the RSL, they have failed to take the appropriate action and the tenant has been to the Housing Ombudsman without a satisfactory result. Then we move into action.

Supplementary Question:

There is a recent BBC London report featuring a Bromley housing association resident who had several years of issues. Is there no way that housing associations that continuously fail residents can be called for questioning at the relevant Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee?

Reply:

Not really until the procedures have been gone through. It would be very convenient if we could just step in, but we cannot. But we will if we have to. We do bring pressure to bear; it is not always successful but we do bring enormous pressure to bear when we can. I see no reason why this cannot be reported to Renewal, Recreation and Housing PDS Committee

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Vanessa Allen:

What is the point of having representation on the Clarion Board for example, which is Cllr Harris at the moment. Is there any feedback from that, and anything the Council can do via that route?

Reply:

Although we are formally not allowed to do it until procedures are gone through, informally, we do and having a representative on that Board is part of it. Our officers are in touch regularly with chiefs of the various housing associations in the borough.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Pauline Tunncliffe:

I am very aware of the BBC article that you are referring to and that lady happens to be a resident in Orpington ward who I have been helping since December last year. I would like to thank the Portfolio Holder who tried more than once to get in touch with the CEO of Hyde Housing and I would like to praise our officers who responded to every email I sent. I lay the buck firmly with Hyde and I hope it improves now because of what has happened with the BBC.

Reply:

What Cllr Tunncliffe says is absolutely accurate - we spent a considerable amount of man-hours on that case and went above and beyond what we are supposed to do, and I hope the matter has now been resolved.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Kathy Bance MBE:

I have been trying for almost three years now to get Clarion to do some urgent works in one of our heritage buildings. I am not sure if anything is being done with our Clarion representative, but is anything specific being done to preserve our heritage buildings, especially when these are health and safety issues that I have been reporting.

Reply:

We will do everything we can to support that – let me have some details and the latest correspondence and I will take it up personally with the housing association.

5. From Tony McPartlan to the Portfolio holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

At last month's Executive meeting it was discussed how the Additional Restrictions Covid Grant top-up would focus on helping businesses into our vacant units on high streets and industrial units. Can I please get the Portfolio Holder's commitment to support our neglected shopping parades, many of which also have a lot of vacant units?

Reply:

The Additional Restrictions Grant ARG top up fund includes grant streams open to all borough businesses and therefore businesses in local shopping parades do have the opportunity to bid.

Supplementary Question:

What has been done to promote awareness of the Local Parades Initiative to relevant businesses?

Reply:

This is always a difficult problem. It is on the website, we are also using the local business organisations, the Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, and ward councillors know about this, so we are doing everything we can. It is not practical to get an officer to knock on every door, we do everything we can to make people aware of it.

Councillor Hannah Gray added, as Small Business Champion, that the Council tried to communicate with as many small businesses as possible, and invited people to contact her directly if they were aware of any that had not been communicated with. The grants were there to make their lives easier.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Angela Wilkins

Councillor Morgan mentioned the local parades initiative, can he give me an assurance that the officers dealing with that work are now getting back on top of their in-trays, which was held up severely by covid work on grants, which obviously had to be done, because I have a bid in for Anerley which was ready to go to the Panel well over a year ago and I would like to see that progressed.

Reply:

I will take that up first thing tomorrow.

6. From Hatice Ocal to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

The public has expressed distrust in the Council ever refurbishing the neglected public toilets in Crystal Palace Park. How can this happen for so long in such a manner which has become an embarrassment for us all? Is the Council addressing this and will it assure the public that the necessary works will be completed by April, 2022?

Reply:

The Council has invested considerably in the park over the past few years, including in the new café, for example, and the development of the Regeneration Plan. The Regeneration Plan received outline planning permission earlier this year and is currently with the Mayor of London for sign off. The Regeneration Plan is a £40m scheme for the park which includes investment in the toilets at the Penge end of the park, and new toilets at the Rockhills end, in the vicinity of where the Caravan Club is currently situated. Additionally, the café at the Penge end of the park includes five toilets, including two disabled. The old park café had no toilets, and therefore the Council has invested in new toilets by providing the new café in the park and this will enable a better approach to management and maintenance and we will be reviewing the hygiene regime as well

Supplementary Question:

The condition of the public toilets at the moment is unimaginable – they are an embarrassment and unusable. I have heard from the public again and again of how bad the conditions are. Children dread going to the toilet, but they have to. We do not know if the Mayor is going to sign off the budget. Can anything be done about it? It has been for the last forty years. Is something going to be done to improve the condition of the toilets?

Reply:

The answer is yes – I have just said that we are going to review the whole hygiene regime because although we do not know yet if the Mayor is going to approve our £40m regeneration plan soap and water is cheap enough – we can get the toilets cleaned and we will.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Angela Wilkins

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that the five toilets he refers to in the café are not open to the public – they are for customers to use. What happened to the toilets in the original plans for the new café which were to be there for the public, because those disappeared. I am not sure there are five toilets in the current building, and they certainly are not open to the public.

Reply:

The old café had no toilets at all, so whatever toilets there are in the café are more than we had before. The fact that in theory you must buy a cup of coffee to use them is just one of those things, but we are planning to improve the state of the toilets throughout the Park anyway.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Ryan Thomson

Would the Portfolio Holder agree with me that Crystal Palace Park is not only of local importance but its importance and interest also spans London-wide, nationally and internationally. If he does agree with me that Crystal Palace Park is a key cultural landmark, would he also apply common sense to recognise Hattie's survey with the recognition it deserves. At present, the rules are that between 2,000 and 2,500 signatures must be local under our protocols for it to be considered at committee. However, Hattie has reached roughly half that amount plus 2,000 further signatures from beyond Bromley. With Crystal Palace Park being of not only local importance, but national and international, I ask the Portfolio Holder to take the results of this survey to Committee rather than allowing this important matter to go unaddressed or not being properly spoken to on the floor tonight.

Reply:

I take it very seriously. The fact that the petition did not reach the appropriate number is neither here nor there – we take the problem seriously and we are going to try to resolve it. You mention quite rightly that the Park is of national and local significance. It borders five local authorities including our own. How much money do we get from the other four? Zero – that is not a great help. If we got money from them or from the Greater London Authority it would assist us in trying to make improvements to the Park. We have formed the local Trust to run the Park and we are hoping that they will gradually take over and do things extremely well for the Park in future.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Vanessa Allen:

Would it help the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing if his colleague the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services, who is actually responsible for idverde services and for parks would also assist in this matter and between them get the cleaners in and get the toilets working properly.

Reply:

We will.

(On a point of order, Cllr Nicholas Bennett MA JP suggested that if members of the public did not read out their questions it would mean that people lower down the order paper would get a chance to ask their questions, and also it would be right for members to exercise restraint in the number of supplementary questions being asked - when he had overseen the introduction of additional supplementary questions it had been intended that only one or two extra questions would be allowed on a public question.)

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Kathy Bance MBE:

I believe I heard that you were waiting on the Mayor of London. Can you assure us that something is being done whether or not the Mayor of London comes back to us in due course, so that something is done immediately?

Reply:

Yes, the whole hygiene regime will be done, regardless of the Mayor – that is nothing to do with him. It is the improvements, the extra toilets where we do not have the money unless that scheme goes through – that is what we are waiting for.

7. From Hatice Ocal to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

As of today, more than 3,350 park users have signed an e-petition demanding improvements to the toilets in Crystal Palace Park. What is the council going to do in the immediate future to address the appalling state of these toilets?

Reply:

The answer is exactly the same as for the last question.

8. From Jessica Arnold to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

Has the Council Leader, Mayor, ward councillors or the relevant portfolio holder received representations from residents in Copers Cope ward who are concerned about empty homes and properties in the area, and is there any action being taken or planned to reduce the numbers of empty properties, reduce the safety risks that surround empty properties, and return them to beneficial use as housing or other public assets for the Copers Cope community?

Reply:

We have not received e representations regarding empty homes in the Copers Cope Ward area specifically. In general terms, the Planning Enforcement team does have limited powers to serve an Untidy Site Notice under Section 215 of the Planning Act, however this can only address matters where the condition of a building or land adversely affects the amenities of an area. It cannot require occupation or redevelopment of a site and so cannot directly tackle the issue of empty buildings.

The Council does liaise regularly with housing associations to ensure empty properties are let as quickly as possible. All Housing Associations have strict targets on void turnarounds and publish annual performance statistics against those targets. These are also monitored and published by central government through the CORE data system. Where properties are vacant for an extended period we do investigate with the housing associations to clarify the reason for this and ensure that, where possible, these homes can be brought back into use.

In addition to the work being undertaken with Housing Associations the Council also works with the owners of privately owned empty homes and offers assistance by way of

grants and referrals to our contracted management services in order to bring these homes back into use.

Supplementary Question:

Does it follow that if representations were made from local residents then that would be followed through if those representations were to include safety issues which I do not think was mentioned in your answer then they would be looked into quite urgently?

Reply:

It depends on the safety issues. If the safety issues are within the property and it is empty then that is not a matter of public concern. If the issue is affecting the environment, the street or the neighbours then we would look into it urgently.

9. From Jessica Arnold to the Chairman of Development Control Committee

Was planning permission granted for the felling of 12 (or any number of) mature trees on the site of the former Beckenham Theatre (at the junction of Bromley Road and Manor Road in Beckenham), and if so, on what basis was the decision made, and if not, will Bromley Council now be taking enforcement action against the owners of the site?

Reply:

I am aware that the felling of the trees from the former Beckenham Theatre site has been investigated and none of the felled trees were subject to protection orders, and therefore unfortunately there is no action Bromley Council can take in respect of the felled trees. However, I would like to assure you that Bromley Council takes unlawful development, including unlawful felling of protected trees very seriously. The Council does not determine the level of fines for cutting down protected trees without permission but if the Council pursues a successful prosecution for unauthorised felling in the Magistrates Court the maximum fine the Court can impose is £20,000 per tree. Lesser offences, such as unauthorised pruning can receive a fine of up to £2,500 per tree in the Magistrates Court. Serious offences of tree felling that go to the Crown Court can be subject to unlimited fines following a successful prosecution, and I am confident that Bromley Council will do everything in its power to press for the stiffest fines and for any offender to be named and shamed.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr

As one of the Councillors for Copers Cope ward, can the Chairman confirm that many residents and councillors were shocked when the developer, without giving any notice, did not properly fell the trees, but he just cut them off a few feet from the ground. This is the kind of action that developers will take in order to clear the site but it is open to us as councillors and any member of the public to request a tree preservation order on valuable trees, and although Bromley borough has more tree preservation orders than any other London borough of the thirty-two, nonetheless there are fine trees, particularly

in Beckenham, and it is up to members of the public (they do not have to own the land) seeing a tree to apply to this Council and if it is a valuable tree the Council will readily issue a tree preservation order. Is that correct?

Reply:

Yes, that is correct. I dare say that there are many examples of fine trees that make a positive contribution to an area that are not currently covered by a tree preservation order that would merit it and it is up to members of the public or ward councillors to come forward and ask for a tree preservation order to be made either for a single tree or a group of trees.

Supplementary Question:

Part of my supplementary question has already been anticipated, but is there any assistance that the Council can provide with members of the public knowing that they can do this, because I did not know this before this evening. We have a beautiful borough with so many trees and I am sure that more have not got preservation orders than do.

Reply:

Yes, we can always do more with publicity, we can put it on the website and in the Environment newsletter that is delivered to all residents' homes. That is something I would like to see happening.

(At this point, the time allowed oral replies expired, and the remaining questions received a written reply.)

10. From Will Conway to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

The Council has released its Open Spaces Strategy for 2021-2031 which it says includes feedback from earlier consultation with stakeholders. Why was it not sent to, amongst others; all those who fed into the document, Opposition councillors, key stakeholders such as allotment societies and park "Friends" groups.

Reply:

The redrafted Open Space Strategy has not been released at this stage as a public document. An engagement opportunity with the partner organisations and the Friends Forum was recently arranged in order to share and inform the outcome of the redrafting exercise containing the proposed strategy. These organisations formed part of the consultation exercise undertaken in late 2020.

The strategy will be presented to the November ECS PDS Committee for final approval and publication. The Committee Report will provide summary information of the initial

public consultation from almost 900 responses, also providing feedback from partner organisations, allotment associations, Councillors and Friends Groups. Information from the engagement session will also be included in this report.

11. From Owen Wittekind to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families

A report in July found that Bromley had the 8th highest level of food poverty in the UK at 10.3%. At a time of higher bills, lower wages, and a £1040 Universal Credit cut, what steps are the Council taking to ensure that no family goes hungry this Christmas?

Reply:

Thank you for your question, however I am disappointed, although sadly not surprised, that a representative from the Bromley & Chislehurst Labour Party is peddling a bogus report as fact, when it is quite apparent to anyone living in Bromley that it is complete bunkum. Does anybody honestly believe that Bromley has the 8th highest level of food poverty in the UK?

After numerous attempts, over several weeks of being ignored, our Assistant Director for Strategy, Performance and Corporate Transformation eventually had an hour-long meeting to discuss the report with one of the named authors of the report from Sheffield University.

The list of what is wrong with the report is too long to go into now, but given that they surveyed 4,231 residents nationally, across 309 districts, which means an average of 13 residents per borough being surveyed, we asked how many people in Bromley were surveyed and where did they live.

Two simple questions you would think, but they were unable to answer either of them. We were, however, advised that allocations of survey results across districts were uneven, but they would definitely have interviewed at least one person from Bromley. They could only be certain they had interviewed one person, and they could not tell us at a postcode level where they lived.

Eligibility for Free School Meals is widely accepted as the proxy indicator for deprivation. In Bromley FSM eligibility is significantly below the London and national averages.

Our popular and successful Holiday Activities and Food Programme will continue at Christmas, offering children access to positive activities and food. We have recently received details of the Household Support Fund Grant and will maximise this funding, including issuing supermarket vouchers, to support Bromley children and their families

12. From Owen Wittekind to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

Affordable housing is crucial for young people. The Housing Strategy 2019-2029, outlines 1,424 homes need to be built annually to match the rising population. How many new homes were built in Bromley in 2019-2020, how many were affordable homes and what was the cost of building one affordable home?

Reply:

The current annual target set out in the London Plan for Bromley is 774 (for monitoring purposes central government has however adjusted to reflect the impact of COVID on construction work). In 2019/20 the total housing delivery was 485 units of which 109 were affordable housing.