

Council - 6th December 2021

Questions from Members of the Council for oral reply

1. From Cllr Kieran Terry to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

In October the Council won a national award putting us best in the country for financial management of the Council's assets. What specific achievements were highlighted in gaining the award and what should other councils be able to learn from Bromley's success?

Reply:

To support key services, including for the most vulnerable, the Council produce an annual investment income of an estimated £13.8m per annum which comes from the strategy of property investments and other rent income alongside alternative treasury management arrangements.

We have received this prestigious Public Finance 2021 Achieving Excellence in Asset Management award which is highly regarded in the public finance community. This was a national acknowledgement of the excellent work the Council has delivered on pension fund performance and treasury management.

The performance was outstanding. For the £1.4bn pension fund, the rankings put Bromley 1st over 5 and 10 years, and 2nd over 1 year, 3 years, 20 years and 30 years. This represents outstanding performance and as a result the fund is "fully funded" (110% at last actuarial valuation and subsequently increased to an estimated 130% plus) to reflect this outstanding performance. The net annual return in 2020/21 is 34.1% compared with a benchmark return of 23.6% (a difference of 10.5%).

For Treasury Management the Council has delivered a net annual return in 2020/21 of 2.56%, compared with the bank base rate of 0.1%. Clearly in the top performance category compared with peers in the UK.

What does this mean for the Council's finances? The outstanding performance of the pension fund has reduced the Council's general fund costs by at least £6m per year. Whilst the Treasury Management performance has delivered additional income of over £4m per annum for the exceptional performance. This combination of additional income

and reducing employers' costs has enabled more money to be spent on key services and reduces the burden to council taxpayers.

This outstanding performance is not just a one off. The exception work has achieved recognition in the 2019 Public Finance Awards and for the last four years the Council has won two Local Authority Pension Fund Awards, was runner up in one year and a commendation in another year.

It is important that all Councils that administer pension funds and have treasury management resources, pay attention on these key financial areas to improve their overall finances, reduce cost to the council taxpayer and help protect key services. Some councils may see this as 'below the radar' but an organisation can make a real positive differences to its overall finances by ensuring adequate attention and innovation in these areas which can deliver substantial financial benefits within a risk framework.

Supplementary Question:

Does the Portfolio Holder agree that other Councils such as Lewisham and Croydon should take note of Bromley's financial position, and will he join me in thanking Cllr Keith Onslow, the Pensions Committee and Finance Officers for their effective management of the Pension Fund?

Reply:

I do agree and I thank those who have guided our pension fund so well.

2. From Cllr Kevin Kennedy-Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Care & Health

Certain Care homes are on the verge of closure in Bromley due to being hit hard by the pandemic. Whilst the homes are independent, any closures would greatly affect the vulnerable residents and their families. What help is the Portfolio Holder willing to provide to Care Homes to ensure our elderly and vulnerable are protected.

Reply:

It is fair to say that across the Country the demand for Care Home beds has reduced, partly due to the number of people that sadly passed away during the pandemic, but also due to the fact that fewer people are wishing to move into homes because of the national coverage about the impact of covid.

In Bromley during the pandemic we saw the closure of one home, which was due to the retirement of the owner after many years of running the home and we are aware of one other home that is currently considering the viability of continuing in business.

The Council provided and continues to provide a high level of support to care homes which was recognized as part of our award from the MJ. Our relationship with providers

is good, we have maintained ongoing dialogue with them, providing advice, PPE, financial support and practical support and this has been recognized by the sector. This stands us in good stead as we move into the winter months.

Supplementary Question:

How does the Council monitor when care homes are at risk of closure, and support them? If a home does close what does the Council do to minimise the disruption to residents?

Reply:

I can circulate an appendix with further information after the meeting. Our officers do work with care homes to make sure that residents are looked after in these circumstances.

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

Please explain:

- the frequent & long-standing absences of loo roll in Crystal Palace Park toilets?
- what you suggest park users do when faced with such absences?
- what skills and qualifications are required of contractors to replace a toilet seat?

Reply:

- The toilets are restocked at least daily all year as per idverde's contractual obligation, although we often do this three times a day due to anti-social behaviour and demand. During the summer months an attendant is at the Park between 10am and 6pm on weekends to ensure cleaning and restocking is done regularly enough. The issue is that the toilets remain open after the team have finished their shift and this is when the problems usually occur. The park is now often busy in the evening as more and more people are enjoying the features such as the redeveloped café and bar.
- The nearest toilet that is part of the Bromley Community Toilet scheme is at McDonalds, Penge High St.
- Contractors would need to be Council approved suppliers that have demonstrated their competence by having the required skills, knowledge, aptitude, training and experience to complete the tasks required of them.

Supplementary Question:

The toilets are serviced by idverde once a day, which is nowhere near adequate given the use of the Park, particularly during special events. Use of large fixed rollers rather than individual toilet rolls has been suggested, but the response was that the toilet roll holders would be stolen for scrap.

Reply:

I will ask idverde for a view on the toilet roll holders. The Crystal Palace Park Trust is taking over control of the Park and we can discuss these issues with them.

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

Please explain why a Communications Plan purely for the planting of new trees is justified when the same do not exist for COVID grant applications and the recently announced Household Support Fund?

Reply:

When the Council is promoting its own policy initiatives, it can do so in a style and manner that it chooses to.

When the Council is promoting a Government initiative whilst distributing their Grant Funding, it needs to follow their guidance which is set out on the following website link for ease of clarity:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-support-fund-guidance-for-local-councils/household-support-fund-final-guidance-for-county-councils-and-unitary-authorities-in-england>

I am very pleased to confirm that in addition to the five hundred or so Bromley households who have already benefited from the Government's generous provision of the Household Support Fund to date, further periodic advertising of the fund's availability remains planned ahead of its closure on 31st March 2022 to maximize its uptake by eligible applicants.

Supplementary Question:

Five hundred applications may have been made, but not all have been dealt with – more resources need to be put in.

Reply:

If you can identify any specific cases that have not been dealt with then please let the officers know in the morning.

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

Can the Portfolio Holder detail the progress made on successful applications to the Small Parades Initiative in the last 6 months and what plans are there to catch up any backlogs?

Reply:

As recently presented to the Renewal, Recreation and Housing PDS Committee the Local Shopping Parades scheme has been severely impacted by Covid with staff seconded to work on the business grant programme. The challenging circumstances were raised as an issue internally in July and following this, a project officer is now working full-time to progress all live schemes. Since the end of October, the Head of Regeneration has been provided with weekly progress reports for all 18 parades to ensure that all live projects are attended to on a weekly basis to speed up progress going forward. As a consequence, progress has been made on the following schemes: Royal Parade, Belmont Parade, Rosehill Parade, The Pantiles, and Green Street Green.

Supplementary Question:

I accept that staff have been seconded, but can you assure us that they will be able to concentrate on the Parades Scheme in future?

Reply:

Yes, we can proceed more quickly now.

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

What lessons have you and the Council learned from the process for developing the recently approved Open Space Strategy?

Reply:

The main lessons that we have learned with developing the Open Space Strategy are as follows:

- Ensuring that we reach out to as wide a range of stakeholders as possible to ensure that the views of all the Bromley Community are heard when drafting the strategy.
- To be clearer as to the remit of the strategy with respect to the sites that it will apply to and the level of detail that it will go into in comparison to the delivery plans.
- Ensuring that we use language that is easy for everyone to understand and unambiguous terminology with regards to our intentions for the Open Space Portfolio.

Supplementary Question:

Can you explain the process?

Reply:

This has been looked at in great detail, and a press release was issued to clarify the terminology and ensure that it could not be misunderstood.

7. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation & Housing

Can you please explain what the role is of the Council's representative on the Clarion Housing Group South London Regional Scrutiny Committee?

Reply:

The role is about wider scrutiny of Clarion's performance, and is not concerned with individual cases.

Supplementary Question:

I am surprised at this response. Our part of the borough has much social housing. I have had five holding replies from Clarion on the matters I raised at the last Council meeting.

Reply:

The performance of providers of socially rented housing providers is monitored by the Homes and Communities Agency (now Homes England and the Regulator of Social Housing) and the Housing Ombudsman. The Council cannot take action until these routes have been completed. I agree this is very bureaucratic and it is frustrating for me.

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

The Friends of Cator Park and Alexandra Recreation Ground paid for a bench to be installed in April, could you please explain why Idverde have still not installed it?

Reply:

There have been two isolated instances where parts for specific bench designs were put on hold by the third-party supplier due to difficulties with ordering. There has also been a back log of work for our Infrastructure team to complete due to the difficulty in obtaining correct materials due to COVID and industry delays, and also increased infrastructure works during 2021. We can confirm that the bench in question will be installed by the end of the year. We apologise for any inconvenience caused and will update the Friends Group on the estimated time of installation for the bench.

Supplementary Question:

I can report that the bench was installed on Friday. This is good news, but the wait of eight months is not good. Why has performance been so poor on this and other occasions.

Reply:

The cases regarding the benches are due to Covid-19 and the supply problems with materials. This should not be happening in future.

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

How many (i) dead dogs, (ii) dead cats were recovered in the last period for which records were available and what process is in place for notifying their owners?

Reply:

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, 976 enquiries were received under the 'Dead Animal' subject code. Whilst this subject does not differentiate cats and dogs with exact figures, a search has been undertaken to identify reports which reference 'cat' or 'dog' in the description which showed 65 cats and 6 dogs. Domestic animals collected are scanned for a microchip and wherever possible owners will be contacted. Where it is not possible to identify the owner, the Council publishes the details on our website for residents of missing animals to monitor. The latest report is of a ginger cat which was found on 20th November 2021.

(As Cllr Bennett was not present a written reply was provided.)

10. From Cllr Aisha Cuthbert to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

We've seen a number of recent questions from councillors regarding housing association properties. These concerns raised are from residents living in Clarion, Hyde, A2Dominion and Moat Housing properties. Could the Portfolio Holder please remind all Members what can be done to address residents' concerns regarding repairs since the Council has no direct involvement and no decision-making authority of any of these independent housing associations?

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 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.

Supplementary Question:

Can we consider asking the Chairman of Renewal, Recreation and Housing PDS Committee whether this issue can be scrutinised by the Committee?

Reply:

I will do that.

11. From Cllr Kieran Terry to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

How much debt interest did the London Borough of Bromley pay during 2020 and 2021 to date? In answering please indicate how much debt the London Borough of Bromley carries and a comparison to other neighbouring local authorities.

Reply:

I have a table which illustrates this -

Interest Payments and Borrowing 2019/20 and 2020/21 (£k)

LA	2019/20		2020/21	
	Interest	Borrowing	Interest	Borrowing
Bexley	10,631	233,051	10,451	233,043
Bromley	0	0	0	0
Croydon	43,659	1,217,330	38,948	1,170,744
Greenwich	16,462	374,654	14,612	371,199
Lambeth	25,586	591,658	26,626	651,283
Lewisham	35,651	222,987	31,713	222,784
Southwark	37,060	627,634	29,825	683,989
Sutton	10,200	312,126	11,133	412,127

(Note: Data is not yet available for the period 01/04/21 to date.)

Last year, Croydon paid £39m in interest, and Sutton paid £11m. Bromley paid no interest.

Supplementary Question:

Does he agree that spending of £39m and £11m on debt interest is not acceptable?

Reply:

I do agree.

12. From Cllr Kevin Kennedy-Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Residents are expressing concern at the number of delivery scooters parking on the High Street bays outside McDonalds in Penge. This affects High Street trade and

includes a disabled bay which comes under Council responsibility. What action will the Portfolio Holder take to resolve this?

Reply:

Parking Services have instructed the Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) to issue PCNs immediately to these delivery mopeds, however quite often when the CEOs arrive to enforce the vehicles move on and will return once the CEO has left the area. The Council are unable to issue via CCTV, therefore PCNs issued by CEOs are the only enforcement method available.

Parking Services are fully aware of this problem in Penge and other parts of the Borough and it is one that is shared by the majority of London Councils with the increased popularity of these services. Officers will be contacting the local Police to discuss a joint exercise to assist with the enforcement of these vehicles.

Supplementary Question:

This issue does indeed exist in us and many other boroughs. Can the Council address the delivery drivers issue directly?

Reply:

I have asked Legal to look at other avenues – I will keep you informed.

(At this point the time allowed for questions expired – the remaining questions received written replies.)

13. From Cllr Angela Wilkins to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

Will he please confirm the precise date when the UPS switch will be repaired and also provide details of expenditure to date on the 'man in the van' retained to oversee the faulty switch?

Reply:

The UPS switch was replaced on 27 November 2021. To date the Council has spent £117,700.80 on providing a contingency support to ensure that the Council's power supply is maintained on a 24 hour, 7 Days a week basis to support the Council's operations including server provision.

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

Will the Leader instruct the Portfolio Holders to respond to emails from other councillors within a certain time, even if it is a holding reply pending further work?

Reply:

I know that they routinely do, but should you ever have or feel the need to chase a response, please by all means 'cc' me into it.

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

In the last year there have been delays to the planning application process. What improvements have been made to overcome these issues and are delays still occurring?

Reply:

There have been delays in processing applications over the past year and the team is in the process of resolving these delays. In addition to problems presented by the pandemic, staffing turnover issues and problems with processes have been identified and are being addressed and the delays are being reduced week on week at present, with a view to achieving target levels again early in the new year, although it should be noted that once validation delays are resolved this does take a few months to work through to determination times.

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

Both the 2020 and 2021 surveys of public satisfaction with Grounds Maintenance in Bromley show that over 50% of respondents are dissatisfied with facilities in parks (i.e. drinking fountains and toilets). What action do you propose to take to rectify this? Will you institute a programme of installing drinking fountains in public parks, to reduce the use of plastic water bottles?

Reply:

All Park toilets are currently in the process of having a full condition survey to identify maintenance costs.

We review the public satisfaction surveys to identify areas for improvement and in the case of facilities in parks, further work will need to be undertaken to understand the public's priorities for facilities and the cost and benefits associated with each of them.

We will liaise with Thames Water if they are willing to expand their Drinking Fountains for London initiative locally.

17. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Community Services

Fly-tipping is a major problem in Penge & Cator and many other wards in Bromley. Where there are 3 mixed glass recycling bins and only one for tins/plastic and one for cardboard/paper would you look at replacing one of the mixed glass bins for another paper or plastic and cans?

Reply:

All recycling banks in the Borough are swept and cleared of accumulations and fly-tipping materials every day before 9am. In some cases where persistent mis-use of the banks is common place, a second visit is carried out in the afternoon. Where heavy use is identified, and the volume of containers insufficient, in partnership with our service provider Veolia, we would determine if additional visits are feasible and/or if additional bring banks would remedy the situation. We would be happy to investigate replacing one or more containers with other varieties, depending on availability.

One of the actions taken this year to tackle fly tipping across the borough was the face-to-face engagement exercise as part of the 'Your Waste is Your Responsibility' campaign. One of the areas selected for this campaign was within the Penge and Cator ward. The results of the campaign were positive with a reduction in fly tipping of over 60% in this area. We plan to use temporary notices fixed to the banks over Christmas at all our recycling sites to remind residents not to leave any items on the ground surrounding them.

18. From Cllr Nicholas Bennett MA JP to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Services

How many instances of graffiti were removed in the Borough in the last year for which records are available?

Reply:

Graffiti enquiries between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 totalled 2,185 across all services (principally comprising of Street Environment and Parks & Greenspaces).