

Council

10 October 2022

Questions from Members of the Council for Oral Reply

1. From Cllr Alisa Igoe to the Leader of the Council

August press releases celebrated the opening of two of the first affordable housing schemes built on Council land, mentioning the “25 apartments off Burnt Ash Lane”. However, the latter, with free car park beneath, remains unfinished and closed and has overrun by a year. Would the Leader please extend his apologies to Plaistow residents and businesses, and those waiting to move in, for this major inconvenience, which has also resulted in a loss of footfall to Plaistow ward shops and services.

Reply:

Of course, I would happily apologise to anybody who felt let down by the Council, albeit in this case, as Councillor Igoe is aware having been personally briefed by officers and will I am sure have relayed accurately to any enquiring third party, the delay in question is not the Council’s fault.

I am certain that as soon as the snagging issues bedevilling the handover of this scheme are finally completed, which I am advised remains on schedule for the end of this month, that the residents moving into their new National Award winning Homes will find that the wait, as frustrating as it has been, has been worthwhile.

Regarding local businesses, my anecdotal understanding is that people have chosen to avail themselves of the 90 minutes free parking available at Lidl’s (providing they use it, of course) over recent months and it is also the case that the use of P&D on Burnt Ash Lane has jumped by over 80% this year compared to the same period between May and September 2019, so it is very much hoped that any interim foot fall issues will have proven limited in their scope.

What local businesses now have, and will benefit from moving forwards, is an additional 25 homes on their doorsteps which wouldn’t otherwise have been there, with whom they will be able to transact multiple repeat sales to, for the next 60 years.

2. From Cllr Tony McPartlan to the Leader of the Council:

Does the Leader of the Council really believe that Bromley’s poorest residents will benefit from the 'trickle down' economic policies recently announced by our new Prime Minister and Chancellor?

Reply:

The only recent correspondence I have seen which uses the phrase 'trickle down' following on from the Chancellor's recent Statement, has been from the left leaning Guardian Newspaper, so I respectfully suggest that you ask them.

Do I believe that Conservative Prime Ministers and Conservative Chancellors are better for every single resident of this Borough and indeed the entire Nation, than anything the Labour Party can ever hope to offer, irrespective of their social standing or financial status? Absolutely.

Supplementary Question:

As part of this policy package, it is looking quite likely that there will be substantial cuts coming to public services. In fact, earlier this month the Local Government Minister said that there is undoubtedly fat to be trimmed from local government budgets. So, in the light of this, can I get the Leader's commitment to everybody in Bromley that he will oppose, in the strongest form, any attempt to cut Bromley's local government funding?

Reply:

I am not only very happy not only to confirm that is the case, but I will also be absolutely delighted if colleagues across this chamber, irrespective of which desk they are sitting behind, were to join the campaign for Fairer Funding, which keeps getting booted into the long grass. I have had this conversation with Yvette Cooper as long ago as 2004. We were promised great change when the Conservatives got in, when we eventually got in with the Lib Dems we were told by Conservative colleagues we cannot do it as the Lib Dems will not let us. Come 2015 there were other things on people's minds, the Fairer Funding Review is becoming something of a fabled myth, and we need it as you will see when the budget setting process begins in a month or so. The financial backdrop, even in Bromley, and we are one of the better positioned Councils for finances and financial discipline, is that the end of the line is coming and there are already rumours of a good number Councils filing for bankruptcy, depending on the settlement. That will be something I will be very pleased to welcome all colleagues on, because it has gone far enough, and it needs to stop.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Simon Jeal:

What is his position on the impact of massive unfunded tax cuts and the impact of the Chancellor's mini budget particularly in regards to the cost of Government borrowing increasing and mortgage rates increasing as a result?

Reply:

I am incredibly glad, ashamed it was proposed in the first place. When you make a mistake the best thing you can do is correct it immediately and apologise. Moving back up to 45% was the correct thing to do- it is just a shame the apology did not come a bit quicker.

3. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Road Safety

Please can the Portfolio Holder comment on the delays to the completion of the plans for the Elmers End Road parade under the small parades initiative which I understand are due to the main contractor not digging tree pits.

Reply:

I understand that the application was made by a business that has ceased to exist. I have been told that there is still a reason to have this tree, so it will be planted in this coming season.

Supplementary Question:

The scheme in general has been delayed. I understand that a number of attempts to get in touch with the contractor have been unsuccessful. What is the process for dealing with lack of response from the contractor within this contract?

Reply:

If Councillor King would like to write to me I will look into it.

4. From Cllr Chris Price to the Leader of the Council

Would the Leader of the Council like to join me in welcoming the decision by our local NHS partner, Oxleas NHS Foundation, to be recognised as an accredited London Living Wage Employer?

Reply:

I have no opinion either way concerning Oxleas' decision, which is clearly theirs and theirs alone to make, within the confines of the budget made available to them via the wider NHS.

Supplementary Question:

It is a shame that you have chosen not to comment on this. Bromley is so close as an employer to being on the wage that we are looking at in London. I would encourage you to look at this from the Council's point of view from being seen as a good and fair employer, which is what we all want. We can take the opportunity to learn from what Oxleas have done and look at how we can implement this across the borough and our supply chain.

Reply:

Colleagues will be having discussions with staff concerning next year's pay rise over the course of coming weeks. I think that conversation needs to be had with the staff first rather than speculated upon. I will refrain from commenting at this stage.

5. From Cllr Will Connolly to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces

Can the Portfolio Holder please report on the Council's public toilet provision and any areas planned for improvements, including the community scheme provision?

Reply:

There are currently 30 public toilets across the borough, including those that are part of the Community Toilet Scheme and those located in parks. New applications to the Community Toilet Scheme are always welcomed by the Council.

The Council successfully bid for £220k of government funding last year to bring forward four Changing Places Toilets for people with disabilities at sites across the borough. These sites are Crystal Palace Park, High Elms, and the PRUH, with the fourth site to be confirmed. Additionally, the new West Wickham library building will include public toilets including a Changing Places toilet, and the Crystal Palace Park Trust is also planning investment in the park toilet block near the Penge entrance.

Supplementary Question:

I think we can all agree that from the residents complaints we get in casework, public toilets are really essential in all of our wards, including in our amazing parks. Good public toilet provision is essential for the local economy, for our high streets and communities, including for disabilities as you pointed out. Is the Portfolio Holder aware that one in five people do not go out as much as they would like to, and suffer with loneliness because of the concern over amenity and lack of public toilets? We have reached out to some friends at Age UK London and research has shown that 81% of Londoners do say they would be more likely to visit our high streets, our parks, our cafes and our businesses if there was better provision.

Reply:

As former Loneliness Champion I did not realise that statistic and I am very interested to hear that. From our point of view, we are always looking for more businesses to join the Community Toilets Scheme we are always looking for more businesses to join the Scheme, so if you have potential businesses you would like to send to the Council please do. The other thing is officers are always looking for more grant funding. We had the successful grant funding and hopefully when new funding becomes available we can be successful with future grant funding for more public toilets.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Jeal:

How many of those thirty toilets are currently accessible for residents with mobility issues and also can she concern whether there is one community toilet within each ward in the borough?

Reply:

I will have to get back to you as I do not have that information to hand.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:

That is very interesting about the £220,000 from Changing Places which I had previously read about. I have also read that there is some more funding from that department of £6.5m and I believe Bromley is on the list of local authorities that can apply for that money. Will we be doing so?

Reply:

Yes.

6. From Cllr Jeremy Adams to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management (in Cllr Marlow's absence, the question was taken by the Leader of the Council)

Since Bromley Council's decision to invest in short-dated UK government bonds in November 2021, three-year gilts have fallen in value by about 9% (as at 26.9.22). Could the Portfolio Holder please confirm the current value of the Council's gilts and update councillors on any plans to invest further in UK government bonds?

Reply:

There are currently no UK gilts held within treasury management.

There was a revised treasury policy adopted in November 2021, agreed by the then Portfolio Holder following consideration by Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS Committee. This policy related to the option to invest in sterling denominated non-UK sovereign bonds which are FCA regulated, subject to a maximum exposure of £25m for no more than three years. The minimum credit rating was A-.

An investment of £10m was made, supported by the then Portfolio Holder, in the Israel Jubilee Bond which offered a favourable rate of interest at the time of 1.84%; This investment generated additional income for the Council, helping to fund public services.

Within treasury management all such investments are held to maturity and the original investment amount will be returned on maturity of the bond.

There are currently no plans to invest in short-dated UK or non-UK sovereign bonds.

7. From Cllr Kathy Bance to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families

LBB are responsible for the Safeguarding of all Bromley's pupils. Does that mean we have statistics for the numbers of pupils on Free School Meals? If not can we request numbers of pupils on free school meals from all of our schools?

Reply:

There are 7,874 pupils at Bromley schools eligible for free school meals. Please note that this number will include out of borough children attending Bromley schools.

Supplementary Question:

Your answer was eligible, not those receiving. I am bothered by a report which shows that 10% of our families do not apply for free school meals, even though they are eligible because of the bureaucracy and the stigma around free school meals. In our Safeguarding Procedures, are we missing a safety net if we do not know that each of our children are not receiving at least one hot meal a day?

Reply:

I am happy to investigate with our Director of Education and look into that issue. It is something that our schools manage and they communicate with parents on a regular basis in newsletters and at parents' evenings. There is always more we can do, especially if there are people who could be getting it. I am very happy to take that away and look into that for you.

Additional supplementary question from Cllr Simon Jeal:

What discussions have you and the Director of Education had with schools over the rising costs of food and whether this is impacting schools' ability to provide meals or rising costs for parents of low income?

Reply:

I am not aware of the conversations that the Director of Education has had, but he may well have done. I know he has brought to the Schools Forum issues about the costs of school clubs – breakfast clubs. I am happy to follow this up after the meeting. We have been supporting children through the last summer holidays with free meals and we have funding in place for this half term and the Christmas holidays through the Household Support Grant to issue supermarket vouchers like we have done in the past.

8. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families

In 2018 Council officers were looking into arrangements needed for Bromley to establish a Young Mayor (as many other Councils have) could you please explain why this has not progressed?

Reply:

Having looked into the proposal of creating the post of Young Mayor I have reached the decision that this is not something I would wish to pursue.

My decision is influenced by two key factors. Firstly, there will be a cost attached to the creation of this role, and although it is unlikely to be a large amount it is still an additional and unbudgeted cost which comes at a time where the Council is needing to watch all elements of its spend however large or small.

Secondly, the Council already facilitates the active engagement of young people in local political issues through the Bromley Youth Council, as well as also ensuring that our Children in Care have a strong and active voice through the Children in Care Council.

The Council (via Youth Services) already fund and support a number of representatives from the Youth Council to actively participate in a number of PDS committees as well as running their own council meetings. It also facilitates the annual elections in their schools of new members to the Youth Council, and we assist them to run their annual Manifesto event where they draw up their campaigning issues for the year.

The Council also assists our Children in Care to be actively involved in issues that impact on them and other young people – in particular in relation to their education and transition into adulthood.

On this basis I am satisfied that our young people already have a strong voice and that the Council continues to support them sufficiently to articulate that voice.

Supplementary Question:

You mentioned an unbudgeted cost – can you confirm what the estimated cost of a Young Mayor would be? You also did not mention any of the benefits that having a Young Mayor to the Borough; have you considered those as part of your thinking?

Reply

I do not know the cost, but it would be small. We do have a massive overspend in our department at the moment, so we have to ensure that every penny that is spent is spent on the most vulnerable children, not on something that is superfluous and replaces something that we do already very well indeed.

In terms of the benefits, I think I have already articulated that we already have many benefits from the system we have in place. I have been going to Youth Council meetings for over a decade and not once has a young person ever come to me and asked for a Young Mayor. I am not sure where the demand is – the only person who has ever requested it is yourself.

Additional Supplementary question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:

Can I ask as a mother of two twenty year olds, what communication channel do you use to speak to young people in Bromley as I am sure that my two children are unaware of any of these initiatives that you have spoken about?

Reply:

The Youth Council is present in nearly every school in the borough. It is advertised through school channels, not through us. The Youth Services Team will manage that process through the schools themselves. Nearly every school takes part in it – they have proper elections where they have a room with polling booths and they put a

cross against the person they want as their representative. It is quite a big thing in their schools, and they should know all about it. As I said, nearly every school in the borough takes part.

9. From Cllr Kevin Kennedy-Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Care and Health Services

During the last Adult Care and Health PDS the Portfolio Holder assured me conversations were taking place as how the Council will support its various community centres amid the cost of living crisis where, despite government support packages, energy prices have soared. What is the latest in terms of progress in discussions, support being considered and those involved in the discussions?

Reply:

With regards to the Council run community services, specific to the Loneliness agenda and the action plan which was under discussion at the PDS meeting, work remains ongoing with Officer colleagues and Community Links Bromley and our voluntary sector partners to discuss options of support that may be available.

To date no requests for assistance have been received.

Supplementary Question:

This is a huge issue, and I really wanted to see if there was some more meat on that response. I know that in my ward and in others there is great concerns with people who are running centres which provide things such as food banks and support for people with Learning Difficulties. These are also potential places for Warm Spaces – that is also something that is coming up. How far does the Portfolio Holder see these discussions going and when would she be able to provide a more detailed answer about exactly what questions and solutions are being looked at?

Reply:

I think it is important to note that since the PDS meeting the Government support package around businesses and energy costs has been confirmed and this is applicable for charities and community providers. I would encourage people that are looking at their utility bills to apply under that scheme, which is very well evidenced on the Gov.UK website.

With regard to the questions around warm banks and food banks, I think that is something that is going to be coming up later on in this meeting under one of the motions.