

Council

27 February 2023

Questions from Members of the Council for Oral Reply

1. From Cllr Sophie Dunbar to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

Would the Leader of the Council please confirm what reasonable adjustments have been made under the legislation in the Equality Act 2010 and under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 by the Council since the election in May to accommodate disabled access to all meetings and facilities with specific attention to deaf and hearing impaired persons.

Reply:

In terms of access, all committee rooms have adequate access to facilitate disabled access and meetings are supported by attendant staff to assist in any necessary provision. A hearing loop is in place, however it was recently identified that the existing hearing loop did not accommodate the most recent hearing aid technology. To resolve this, additional portable hearing loops which accommodate the latest technology have been installed to complement the existing hearing loops infrastructure.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you, these units will make a huge difference to all hearing aid users. When I raised the issue nine months ago, and these units are next day delivery, why did it take so long?

Reply:

I am not aware of the specific response but I will follow up with officers and send you a written reply.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:

How long will the disabled toilets be out of action? They have been out of action for a very long time.

Reply:

I do not have the answer available, but there have been problems for some time not just with the disabled toilets in this building, reflecting its age, and that is one of the advantages of relocating to the new site.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Keith Onslow:

I support Cllr Dunbar's efforts to improve hearing facilities at the Council. Can you confirm that when we move premises state of the art facilities will be made

available? The current facilities in this building are clearly of some age, and it does not make much sense to spend a lot of money on them now, but it will be good to have upgraded facilities at that time.

Reply:

I am happy to confirm that we will do so.

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

Has LBB received updates on the results of the Bromley Safer Street Survey which ended in Jan or Feb 2021.

We were advised that the local results would be shared via our SNP and the National would be shared by the Police.

Reply:

The Bromley Safer Streets Survey was actually a Metropolitan Police consultation on their draft Violence against Women and Girls Action Plan. The results have not been made available but have been incorporated into the final Violence against Women and Girls Action Plan.

Supplementary Question:

I did not quite understand the answer. We were told that the results would be circulated through our Safer Neighbourhood Panels – all the Bromley Safer Neighbourhood Panels were supposed to be getting a report that they could share with their residents and that the national one would be delivered and published online. We have not received any feedback whatsoever. This was advertised as an important piece of work around Violence against Women and Girls but it seems to have just happened and there has been no feedback or outcome. Can we ask the Safer Bromley Partnership Board if they can chase up some statistics, particularly those relevant for Bromley.

Reply:

I certainly can do that. This has come directly from the Police and has been followed up by officers. The information due to come through to Safer Neighbourhood Panels was about the Street Safe service where people can submit public spaces where they felt unsafe. When I last checked up on that the response was there was not a great deal of input, so there was little in the way of statistics that they could give us. We will look at it again through the Safer Bromley Partnership Board.

3. From Cllr Tony McPartlan to the Leader of the Council

The first some of our operational property tenants, such as those at Community House, found out about the potential sale of their premises was by reading Council meeting agenda papers. Does the Leader of the Council think that's right and fair?

Reply:

Clearly not, as I have commented on previously. Information flow could and should have been better, both to keep those potentially affected better advised and also to help negate unhelpful scaremongering as to the Council's true intentions.

Supplementary Question:

At the last full Council meeting you said that you had received correspondence from current tenants in support of the Community House disposal and move to the Direct Line building. Why does this freedom of information reply say "The Council has not received any correspondence in support of the disposal of Community House." What is inaccurate, this freedom of information response or yourself?

Reply:

Me on this occasion. I have spoken with some of the lessees who think it is a good idea – that is a simple fact. There are lessees that do think that moving to Direct Line is a good idea. And I will, through the chair of the BVST, as I cannot divulge private information without the correct permissions, pass that information on to you.

4. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces

Can the Portfolio Holder quantify how many times refuse or recycling collections have been rescheduled to a later date on the expected day of collection?

Reply:

The answer is 17. Just to put that into context, that accounts for just 1% of the waste we collect each year. I will take the opportunity to remind Members that changes to recycling and our waste services do happen around holiday times. Please remind your residents that Easter is coming up, and there will be slight changes to collection services.

Supplementary Question:

The experience of residents in Clock House is that this happens frequently. Can the Portfolio Holder comment on the residents' belief that the reason that this is happening is because the wagons do not have sufficient capacity?

Reply:

I have never heard of this issue before. I do not believe you have emailed me – members here can testify that if they do email me about any issues in my portfolio I do get back to them quickly. I would encourage you to email me with any issues and I will follow them up.

I am concerned to hear that – this is not what the data is telling us.

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

Bromley's 2020 draft AQAP stated "declaration of an AQMA places a statutory duty to monitor and take action to reduce levels of pollutants." In 2020 our AQMA was expanded to cover more than half of the borough due to exceedances of Nitrogen dioxide (NO2). Why was Defra's UK Air Information Resource page not showing it until February 2023, after receiving a complaint, and where is the map?

Reply:

The AQMA has been expanded in line with new WHO guidelines which are very ambitious. Bromley meets all the national air quality guidelines, including NO2 and our air quality continues to improve.

In relation to your DEFRA question, we are not sure why they have not updated Bromley's information, including the map, but I have been assured by officers that they did send the information on time before the deadline. It appears to be just an administrative error, and officers will continue to follow up with DEFRA.

Supplementary Question:

Since I submitted that question, I have had another look at DEFRA's website and we seem to have the Air Quality Action Plan uploaded, but it is the March 2010 plan. Officers have obviously communicated with them, and they have put something back onto that website, but it is the 2010 plan. It does not show the AQMA of 2020 which covers Crystal Palace to Mottingham down to Cray Valley and across to Chelsfield and back up to West Wickham which is over half the borough.

Why does the AQMA map and the Air Quality Action Plan prepared in 2020 not appear on the DEFRA UK map and why are we not speaking to them about it?

Reply:

As I said, officers are speaking to DEFRA about that. They had a 2007 map originally so we are getting closer, but not we are not there yet. I have been assured by officers that they are following this up. We will continue to push to get the right information published on their website.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Fawthrop:

Is the Portfolio Holder aware that, when it comes to air quality, the World Health Organisation set targets in 2021 and we meet 50% of those targets fully. In terms of the other 50%, we are well on the way to meeting interim targets 2 and 4 for other measures, so we meet the targets for ozone and PM2.10

Reply:

I was aware of some of those statistics, however I would say that we do need to be careful with this debate and some of those statistics were taken over the Covid period. We should be careful not to over-promise on our air quality. It is very good, but it is important that we use facts in this debate.

6. From Cllr Kevin Kennedy-Brooks to the Portfolio Holder for Children, Education and Families

Would the Portfolio Holder accept that the few Teaching Assistants paid by Bromley would gain more job satisfaction and be more likely to stay in their position if they received the same financial benefits as those working for our Academy Trusts?

Reply:

The Teaching Assistants and Higher Level Teaching Assistants employed by Bromley Council provide a key role in our work to support children across the Borough. The Council publishes job adverts for schools across the Borough and therefore has evidence that the Bromley rate of pay is competitive and often higher than the starting pay from recent academy advertisements. 25% of academies still follow the Bromley pay awards.

The Teaching Assistants employed by Bromley will receive the imminent 7.75% pay rise, subject to the agreement of full Council this evening, and also benefit from inclusion in the Council's merited rewards scheme. The turnover of Teaching Assistants remains low, at less than 15%.

Supplementary Question:

Bromley still has some Teaching Assistants especially in the SEN area, and this is an extremely important role in protecting our children and shaping their future. There is about to be a rise; you have said in your answer that there are some paid less and some paid more. If, in an individual situation, somebody was being paid lower, would you agree to match-fund at an average or higher than average pay for those staff?

Reply:

If you can send me examples of when that has happened I can forward that to the Director of Education and he can look into it.

7. From Cllr Jeremy Adams to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management (answered by the Chairman of the Audit and Risk Management Committee)

In July 2020, auditors EY warned the Council of, 'significant additional time incurred to complete our work, leading to additional fees'. How much did EY bill Bromley Council in additional fees for 2019-20, and how much has EY billed Bromley Council for audits in subsequent years?

Reply:

Cllr Marlow referred the question to the Chairman of the audit and Risk Management Committee, Cllr Michael Tickner.

In relation to 2019-20, the audit remains incomplete owing to issues concerning asset valuations. The Council has therefore not been notified as to the amount of any additional fees. EY, the external auditor, has stated that a final fee for that

period will be determined shortly. Consequently, confirmed final audit fees for subsequent years are not yet available.

Supplementary Question:

Referring to page 31, setting out that we have five vacancies in the Finance Department, two of them for more than six months, how confident is the Chairman that we will avoid additional fees in the future?

Reply:

The number of staff in Internal audit has nothing to do with the work of the external auditor. Their work seems to be increasing – the accounts for 2019/20 are expected to be signed off by April this year, but CIPFA, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, do seem to be issuing more and more guidance and this is just creating more work for accountants. It is not all about headcounts – when it comes to staff it is also about productivity and outcomes, and whether we are getting what we want from the number of staff.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Jeal:

Regarding the link between internal staff and external, does he recall the letter that we were sent by our external auditors referring to the lack of resource in the Finance Team and the delays that there had been in responding to their queries, and does he agree that this lack of resource contributed to the additional time taken for them to sign off the accounts?

Reply:

There has been a turnover of staff, particularly in the section that deals with the external auditors, but as I was trying to explain the external auditors are asking more questions, with more detail, for instance wanting a valuation of all the roads that the borough owns, based on how often they need to be repaired. Does it matter? Are the road assets worth nothing or are they worth what it would cost to renew them? Is it worth the staff spending all this time making an evaluation of our public roads which wear out at different rates? All these issues will be discussed at the next Audit and Risk management Committee and I invite any Members interested to come along and hear more detail.

Councillor Marlow reminded members that in a similar question asked some months ago about the number of staff supporting audit the answer he had given was that the number of staff had doubled. Within the last five years – the Director of Finance could correct that if necessary. Before considering any further increase in staff we need to look at productivity and the regulatory environment that we find ourselves in, rather than the default reaction being to hire more staff, albeit we are aware that many local authorities, particularly in inner London, follow that policy.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Tony Owen:

Give that valuing buildings is a matter of opinion, and we only know their true value when they are sold, does the Chairman think that EY are just making work for themselves which comes to different valuations from the previous auditor, and if

there is a disagreement and PWC were wrong and EY are right, should any additional fees be billed to the previous auditor?

Reply:

I know that EY are speaking to the previous external auditor and I do hope that they are sharing information and saving costs to Bromley taxpayers. This is what we are pressing for and to a certain extent our hands are tied because the external auditors are appointed for us through the scheme that we are in and we have to accept what they say. The amount of work is driven by CIPFA who are thinking up all sorts of new guidance every year.

8. From Cllr Chris Price to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

Please can you inform the chamber;

- a) In the current round, how many residents have applied for the household support fund?
- b) Of these, how many were successful?
- c) How many were not?
- d) What is the total spend to date?
- e) How much is still available for residents?
- f) If it is not all spent by the end of March 2023, how much are we expecting to return to the government?

Reply:

- (a) 1949. In addition 9,200 school children have received 4x £15.00 food vouchers for the school holidays in the period October 2022 to February 2023
- (b) 743
- (c) 124
- (d) £700,600
- (e) £893,800
- (f) We expect to spend all the funds.

Supplementary Question:

These numbers are very low for the number of people coming through, and the money still outstanding is higher than the money we have already spent. We have until the end of this coming month to spend it. Our promotion on this has been irregular, to say the least. The "How to apply" button on the website keeps coming on and going off. Cllr Igoe has been amazing trying to make sure that we get that back on – it was still off over this weekend. This is money that the Conservative Government has given Bromley to give to people who are disadvantaged. I am really concerned that we are going to be handing money back - how are you going to assure me that all of this money is spent and goes to people in need?

Reply:

Applications not awarded as yet consist of 478 new cases under investigation and within the 15 working day time limit, 552 cases await further information or clarification from the applicant to enable them to proceed and there are 52 duplicate

applications. The scheme has been publicised through the Bromley website, on social media through our partner organisations and via internal teams. We continue to raise awareness of the scheme. Thank you for raising the issue of the website – I will take that up with Mr Bridgewater.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:

Will the Portfolio Holder tell me if he has been involved with the Communication Plan for the Household Support Fund? I have been fairly loud emailing when I have noticed that the links are not working and I would like to know if the Portfolio Holder was involved in the Communications Plan.

Reply:

I can confirm that I have discussed it with officers but we have generally followed a similar approach for all of these awards introduced since the start of the pandemic.

9. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces

Over the past two years how many incidents of fly-tipping have been reported, either directly or through Fix My Street, around the area outside the parade of shops in Newlands Park outside Penge East Station?

Reply:

Between January 2021 and January 2023 there have been 41 reports of dumped rubbish on Newlands Park Road by Penge East Station. Of the 41, 40 were received via Fix My Street.

Supplementary Question:

Given the continued and consistent fly-tipping over the past few years can you tell me how many fines have been issued or how many prosecutions have begun in relation to the fly-tipping at that location in the last two years?

Reply:

I can confirm that there have been none. This question was the first time I was aware of this issue, I have asked officers to follow up; their sense was that it is the nature of the rubbish and it is hard to find out where it has come from. Officers have agreed to look at this area and see what more can be done to track down the criminals, but I do not want to give away too much about this in public.

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

A Metropolitan Police gang task group was set up to hopefully route out the known gangs in Bromley. At the time all 4 gangs were believed to be located in Penge. Serious crime and murders are still happening in Bromley so can the police be requested to present the outcomes affecting Bromley borough at a PP&E PDS?

Reply:

Yes, this will be built into the annual crime needs assessment review of crime performance within the borough which is reported to the Safer Bromley Partnership and scrutinised by Public Protection and Enforcement PDS Committee.

Supplementary Question:

Was that the Metropolitan Gang Task Force? We do need to hear regularly because, going back probably six years, we have had five murders in Penge, three are still unsolved and if you look at the statistics these incidents of knife crime and stabbings have spread from Penge into the rest of Bromley, which I warned at the time if we did not do something about tackling them when we knew where they were. Can we keep these reports coming in because we should not have a Gang Task Group that never reports back.

Reply:

Absolutely. There are quarterly reports but they are not very detailed, so that can be one of the things we push for.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Fawthrop:

Can the Portfolio Holder remind me who has overall responsibility for policing in London?

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

Some housing associations are starting to compile damp and mould registers for all their properties as a way of ensuring their tenants live in safe conditions. Will the Council commit to work alongside Pinnacle and do something similar for the properties they manage on our behalf?

Reply:

Yes, this is already being undertaken by Pinnacle and also by Mears for More Homes Bromley to identify any issues and an action plan to resolve them as soon as identified.

Supplementary Question:

Is this something that we can get reported to Renewal, Recreation and Housing PDS Committee so that we can monitor progress?

Reply:

We review these reports via the Operational Board meetings that we have with Pinnacle and Mears so if there are some trends coming out of that there is no reason why that cannot be reported to PDS.

12. From Cllr Josh King to the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces

Does the Portfolio Holder think it acceptable that on a recent clean-up of a street in Clock House residents were able to collect more than 20 bags of litter and composted leaves etc?

Reply:

The Council has collected over 2,000 tonnes of leafing this season and continues to collect from hard-to-reach areas where there are parked cars or where further leaf fall has accumulated.

Likewise, our street cleansing teams deal with over 1,500 enquiries per month as well as attending to scheduled work to ensure litter is removed from the public highway.

I want to put on record my thanks to the volunteers in Clock House. Our Friends groups are key stakeholders in helping us to keep Bromley beautiful, and I would encourage all residents to get involved in one of our Friends groups, whether that is Tree Friends, Street Friends or Park Friends.

Supplementary Question:

Will you investigate scheduled cleaning of gutters and gulleys including requesting access and the moving of parked cars. Do you understand that without this residents will not think they are getting value for money?

Reply:

All streets across Bromley are monitored but if there is a specific issue please email me or report it to a senior officer.

13. From Cllr Chris Price to the Portfolio Holder for Portfolio Holder for Sustainability, Green Services and Open Spaces

Will the Council commit to building a high quality perimeter fence around Hoblingwell in the coming financial year?

Reply:

The anti-social behaviour at Hoblingwell is very sad. I know that you are aware that I have met with the Friends Group a number of times. I know that the community and the Friends group are super dedicated to the park and I want to do what I can as Portfolio Holder to keep the environment as it is and to stop motorbikes from entering the field. But this must be a joint partnership between the Council and Police – this is really crucial. I have asked officers to look at options that are cost effective while not spoiling the natural beauty of the park. Options continue to be explored but funding and fiscal prudence must be considered when exploring new infrastructure projects.

Supplementary Question:

Is that yes, we are going to get a perimeter fence around the park?

Reply:

I do not know yet. We are looking at options but I have to weigh up the issue of protecting the park from motorbikes with the issue of Council finances - that has to be an issue for all of us here and the taxpayers of Bromley.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Jeal:

I believe that around £500,000 was found for fixing a bridge in Kelsey Park from the Healthy Bromley Fund – does the Portfolio Holder consider that this fund might be somewhere where the funds to provide fencing for Hoblingwell could also be found from?

Reply:

This is a new infrastructure project while that was an old bridge – 50+ years old – so that is the difference. Every time this Council makes a decision to put new infrastructure projects in we have to think about the maintenance and maintaining that new infrastructure. These are decisions that do require additional thinking and ensuring that this is the best use of taxpayer money

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe :

We got all that money for Hoblingwell – it is an amazing facility there for the community, for children, for cycling. It seems ridiculous not to put a fence around it considering that the bollards get knocked down regularly.

Reply:

It is a different field to the tracks on the upper field – what we are talking about now is the lower field.

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

The Council-owned Churchill Theatre is one of the South East's leading live entertainment venues, welcoming over 200,000 people a year and providing a huge benefit to arts and culture in the Borough - over the past decade how much has the Council spent on maintaining the theatre building and how much do officers estimate the works needed to bring the theatre back to an acceptable condition will cost?

Reply:

The Council does not hold historic specific repair costs relating to the theatre as the maintenance previously formed part of the overall block contract with Amey. The Churchill Theatre, as has previously been reported, is contained within the operational property review. Work is underway to complete a full feasibility and options appraisal and a report will be provided to members in due course. This work is being undertaken in full liaison with the Theatre.

Supplementary Question:

I note that the costs of maintaining the Churchill are not covered in the Operational Property Review and there is reference to a future report. Can you assure me that the Council will do everything in its power to ensure the continued viability and operation of the theatre which many members will agree is the jewel in the crown of Bromley's arts and cultural scene.

Reply:

We are working with the theatre to try to work out a sustainable future for it.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Sam Webber:

Cllr Ireland and I have also met with the Team at Trafalgar. We welcome the ongoing discussions they are having with the Council. We have specific concerns about how run-down the building has become both internally with regard to plumbing and waste water and the mosaic tiling issues on the outside. We would welcome those discussions and the theatre being fully refurbished. If we could be kept involved as appropriate that would be welcome.