

Council

17 July 2023

Questions from Members of the Council for Oral Reply

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

Will LBB liaise with the perpetrator of the felled trees in Kings Hall Road, to allow a competent and experienced tree surgeon to access the field to properly coppice all the remaining felled oak trunks to allow those trees to then regrow as multi-stem coppice trees which will then be of wildlife value?

Reply:

There is a legal requirement for the landowner to replant trees which have been illegally felled. The Council will be approaching the landowner regarding the options for replanting. Unfortunately, however, the Council cannot dictate the exact method and this will ultimately be for the landowner to decide providing it meets the overall requirement to restock the illegally felled trees.

Supplementary Question:

Is there a plan? Who is responsible for clearing the felled trees? There are 131, so there is a large amount of debris.

Reply:

This case goes across three portfolios, so I will have to get back to you on that.

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

Did London Borough of Bromley participate in 'No Mow May' for parks, green spaces and grass verges across the borough this year?

Reply:

No.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for that concise reply which clears up confusion for many residents who thought that the Council was participating in "No Mow May." As the Portfolio Holder is aware, many of the open spaces across the borough were not mown in May. Can she please explain what the issues that arose with idverde, the Council's contractor, were and what action she is taking to prevent these from occurring again?

Reply:

I would say that I am taking this very seriously and I am seeing officers regularly about this. In the contract with idverde we do have that the grass is cut as often as is needed.

3. From Cllr Alisa Igoe to the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Road Safety – In the absence of Cllr Nicholas Bennett the reply was provided by the Leader of the Council

Environment PDS Committee 29/06: in answer to a resident's written question, you apologised for the delay of the start of the EV on-street charging pilot and said it would now start 03/07. This year long pilot was approved 21/03/22, due to commence autumn 2022, with results reported back to committee in Spring 2024. Could you please elaborate on what are the reasons for the delay?

Reply:

The EV charging Gul-E trial commenced at the start of this month (there are 8 installations at addresses across the Borough). More Officer time can now be dedicated to the procurement of the on-street charging equipment, which is the other aspect of the trial.

The on-street aspect of the EV charging trial has taken longer than the Council would have liked which is due to a number of factors. The procurement has been more complex than anticipated due to the nature of the pilot scheme, whereby officers wish to make a genuine comparison between different types of chargers and different suppliers. EV charging technology has continued to develop and we wish to ensure that we trial systems that will be future-proofed as far as that is possible.

Officers have recently made significant progress in solving this issue and the tender process is due to commence shortly.

Supplementary Question:

We should be looking at Oxfordshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils. Do you truly think that we are ambitious enough with our EV charging strategy?

Reply:

Yes, I do. I am against spending far too much money too quickly on kit that will become obsolete within a few years, such is the pace of technological change. We need to take considered steps.

(During consideration of this question Councillor Simon Fawthrop declared that he owned an electric vehicle.)

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

How can litter that is blown out of kerbside recycling boxes be reduced across the borough and if appropriate, how does the Council plan to increase the take up of the nets sold in our libraries to cover the boxes?

Reply:

We have got Environment Matters, which goes out biannually, that is delivered to every household.

Also, I will be up at 5am with the Veolia Team doing a video giving key messages for residents about recycling and our waste programme, and I will also be talking about the netting. If any Members have any particular requests or questions that could be addressed in the video please get in touch with me.

Supplementary Question:

I am glad to hear that this is being promoted. Can you please ensure that, where residents do use these nets, Veolia staff do not discard them into the refuse.

5. From Cllr Chris Price to the Portfolio Holder for Resources Commissioning and Contract Management (In the absence of Cllr Price a written reply was provided to his question)

Please can you inform the Council in regard to the outturn of the 2022/23 Household Support Fund.

- A. How many residents applied
- B. How many were successful
- C. What was the total spend?

Reply:

- A. 13,857
- B. 13,620
- C. £3,468,994.29

6. From Cllr Tony McPartlan to the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Road Safety - In the absence of Cllr Nicholas Bennett the reply was provided by the Leader of the Council

Accessing the facilities on our local high streets and shopping parades can be difficult, and sometimes impossible, for wheelchair and mobility scooter users. What are we doing to ensure our high streets and shopping parades are accessible to as many of our residents as possible?

Reply:

Whenever a town centre improvement scheme is undertaken the needs of wheelchair users are considered and drop kerbs etc are installed. However, there are locations around our town centres where the addition of new ramps will help make access easier. Where such locations are brought to the attention of Officers or Members, the Environment and Public Protection Department will consider what can be done to make suitable improvements.

Supplementary Question:

Has the Council ever considered working alongside local businesses to improve High Street and Shopping Parade accessibility as part of grant applications.

Reply:

I do not have intimate knowledge of what the Department is doing about accessibility, but certainly we have done this and I am in favour of it. It is what we are all about, trying to lever in money wherever we can get it.

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

I'm aware that I and a number of other councillors have been told that their applications to the Small Parades Initiative have had funding either removed in full or in part.

Can the Portfolio Holder list all applications by ward and amount of funding where this has happened in the last 6 months?

Reply:

It is not true that funding has been removed. However, it is true that some projects that had funding agreed cannot now be delivered or have been identified as at risk due to insufficient business support. The project is recorded as a whole so the date I can provide is for the whole project, not just for the last 6 months. However, I can confirm that over 42% of the funding has already been spent on works that have either been completed or nearing completion, and 17% of the funding is at risk of not being spent on the originally identified works. These funds will be returned to the central pot for Members to bid for again. A detailed breakdown by Ward is provided in the written response to Cllr McPartlan's question.

Supplementary Question:

Does the Portfolio Holder understand that many businesses who have suffered hardship during the Covid lockdown and now the cost of living crisis feel that the Council is withdrawing funding and is not supporting them?

Reply:

The scheme is for capital funding, it does not involve revenue funding, that has never been included in any of the proposals associated with this pot. It has never been part of this project to consider revenue funding.

8. From Cllr Jeremy Adams to the Leader of the Council

Can the Council Leader guarantee that any charity displaced by the proposed sale of Community House will be offered appropriate and affordable accommodation in the Direct Line building?

Reply:

The Council made the decision to sell the freehold interest in Community House with the existing tenant, Bromley Voluntary Sector Trust (BVST), in situ under the 1954 Act protected lease they currently hold. BVST sub-lets to various tenants on commercial terms to which the Council is not party. Therefore to clarify, the sale will not displace the current tenant, and only the current tenant has the legal ability to displace any sub-tenants in accordance with any commercial terms that are provided for within their sub-lease agreements.

A previous commitment during full Council in December 2022 was made, welcoming any sub-tenants to relocate themselves into the Council's new Civic Centre should they be displaced from their current premises at Community House by their landlord

BVST, making assurances that no single current sub-lessee of BVST would be worse off financially if that route was pursued. That offer remains open to this day.

Supplementary Question:

Has the Council been approached by any of the sub-tenants with any form of request for alternative accommodation?

Reply:

At this point in time I have not been involved with the officers dealing with this. It is possible - the Chief Executive will email you if there is any further information that I am not party to. I suspect that everyone involved is waiting to see what happens with the expressions of community interest in the building. If there is any further information you are entitled to see it.

9. From Cllr Jessica Arnold to the Portfolio Holder for Adult Care and Health

On page 79 of the public pack, an update is given on persistent underspending of Public Health budgets, as follows:

“Public health has had underspends in each of the last six years. These were £141k in 2014/15, £152k in 2015/16 and £330k in 2016/17, £395k in 2017/18, £761k in 2018/19 and £358k in 2019/20. This total balance of £2,137k was carried forward to 2020/21. £282k of this was used in 2020/21, and there were underspends again in 2021/22 of £109k and £910k in 2022/23. It is requested that the cumulative balance of £2,874k is carried forward to fund public health initiatives that may be required in 2023/24 and future years.”

What plans are in place to ensure that this year’s funding, which has been allocated for improving Public Health for Bromley residents, is fully spent on such, and are plans being developed with partners to effectively utilise the rather large cumulative balance of £2.9m over coming years?

Reply:

I am advised by the Director of Public Health that planning for the allocation of both the 23/24 Public Health Budget as well as any additional initiatives, where evidenced based health outcomes have been identified to justify additional spending from the accumulated reserve, is at an advanced stage.

As well that a paper detailing the Public Health team’s recommendations will be presented to Health & Wellbeing Board Members at its next meeting on September 21st.

10. From Cllr Kathy Bance MBE to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing

Cllrs who won in the Local Parades grants have been advised that incomplete bids have been closed out and the monies returned to a central pot for other wards to bid for. Why were these incomplete bids not discussed with the ward Cllrs before this decision was made? Why can't the awarded bid money be used in the wards where the bids were won?

Reply:

When the second Local Parade initiative was first announced in 2017, ward members were required to bid for certain works for their ward by 2018 – these were then costed. Due to a range of issues, these works have experienced delays, substantially due to Covid where these works were paused for almost two years. Officers are now trying to deliver as many of the schemes as possible, but some of these works have now been identified as no longer possible, no longer relevant or no longer carrying business support. Ward members have been contacted where this is the case, and asked to try to obtain business support by August if that is the outstanding issue. It was never the intention of this fund to be for specific wards, but rather for specific works within local parades, therefore if the original works cannot be delivered the funding needs to be returned to the central pot for consideration of new schemes which Members are at liberty to bring forward. Ward members have been updated on this. A general verbal update was provided at the RRH PDS meeting in June and a further report is due in September.

Supplementary Question:

We did not bid for the works in a particular parade, it was the parades that won the bids and the works to be undertaken there. I spent two years working to get some of these works done. We were never told that this work is likely not to go ahead, everything I received was positive. The other issue is that, yes, we decided which parades needed improvement and we made suggestions but we were directed by the officers working with us to which parts we could bid for. For example, a notice-board was included but the officer cut it out. And now, the money is not going to be spent and that is absolutely wrong. Where work can be done, even an alternative type to overcome the problem that has arisen, that money should be spent in those parades.

Reply:

I do not know the specifics of the works you are talking about. There are a host of reasons why something might not receive funding, including that we found water mains underneath. The officers can tell you that, if they have not already done so, which I thought they had. We will take that away as an action to give you a full briefing on why your proposal is no longer viable. If a way can be found to make it viable then we can proceed with it, but if we cannot you can put in for revised works.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:

I was told that Plaistow ward had £12k left.

Reply:

There is an amount left over from specific projects in Plaistow. If you look at the written reply to Cllr McPartlan that explains where everything is.

11. From Cllr Simon Jeal to the Portfolio Holder for Public Protection and Enforcement

Could you please provide recent examples of how you have engaged the Metropolitan Police and other public bodies with the aim preventing and tackling hate

crime in Bromley, including the Council's actions in response to the worrying rise in anti-LGBT+ incidents, such as occurred on Bromley High Street on 27th June?

Reply:

As you are no doubt aware, individual incidents are led by the Police and the Council provides a strategic overview.

The welcome introduction of the Borough team means that we can have far more direct conversations about what is affecting us locally and discuss the trends. Also, Superintendent Luke Baldock now co-chairs the SBPB where addressing hate crime is one of the four priorities, this is in addition to the quarterly meetings attended by myself and the Assistant Director with the BCU's Chief Superintendent, Andy Brittain.

Additionally, the Council also receives weekly Hate Crime updates from South BCU which are then discussed identifying actions for various partners. Further we attend the annual Pan London Hate Crime Forum with the Metropolitan Police Service and the quarterly BCU-wide Hate Crime Trends and Updates Meeting.

Supplementary Question:

Can she confirm when was the last time that she met with the Metropolitan Police's LGBT Community Liaison Officer for Bromley BCU?

Reply:

Officers may well have done, and I can check that.

Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Sam Webber:

Does the Portfolio Holder welcome the Bromley BID's support for the LGBT community and will she be increasing engagement with the Bromley BID as part of supporting this important minority community in the borough?

Reply:

I am always happy for things to be brought to me, if they want to approach me that is absolutely fine.

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

Does the Leader feel the Council is providing residents with adequate services and value for money, as we have now (a) employed, at extra cost, a second contractor to work on the backlog of potholes (b) an additional provider is needed to plant new trees, at a 42% cost increase (£566k) over that originally approved and (c) the Portfolio Holder for Green Services says she will now hold bi-weekly meetings with the CEO of our grounds maintenance provider to discuss getting work back on schedule?"

Reply:

Yes, clearly. As well, that where delivery falls short on occasions or circumstances change, it is rightfully challenged and mitigating measures put in place as quickly as possible to address the cause. Including such as:

(a) Employing additional suppliers to meet the increased demand. Possibly the Labour Party opposite would prefer it if the record number of potholes on the Borough's roads after last winter were left unfilled for longer than they have been whilst no doubt attempting to make cheap political capital out of that as well?

(b) As with (a), it would have been helpful had the Labour Party advised us in advance that inflation was set to spike to 11% and make financial provision for it in their 2023/24 alternative Council budget to at least moderate the increase. Possibly they would prefer it if the 'Treemendous' scheme were abandoned and no further money spent on that too?

(c) It is called scrutiny/holding contractors to account, which I had hitherto foolishly assumed that the Labour Party opposite thought might be a good idea.

Supplementary Question:

With the 42% cost increase for planting trees, can you tell me the percentage increase of employing a second contractor?

Reply:

I cannot, but that could be available through the PDS Committee if you ask for it.

13. From Cllr Chris Price to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing (In the absence of Cllr Price a written reply was provided to his question)

With a growing social housing waiting list of nearly 3,000 households, what is the Council's in-borough target for additional social housing over the next 5 years?

Reply:

All Boroughs in London and the South-East are facing the same difficulties as reflected in the comparative number of households in TA including:

Bromley – 1,544
Lewisham – 2,661
Croydon – 1,935

The current target for Council acquisition and development as set out in the homelessness and housing strategies is 1,000 additional units and progress has regularly been reported through the RR&H PDS Committee. Against this target the Council has so far secured a supply of 615 new affordable units through its acquisition and new build schemes and is currently undertaking feasibility work for the development of up to a further 230 new affordable homes. Work is also underway with housing association partners to support the regeneration of existing estates and increase the supply of new affordable units across the borough. The Homelessness and Housing strategies aim to not only increase the supply of affordable housing but to also support residents to prevent homelessness wherever possible, including assisting more than 130 households into privately rented accommodation last year. The Council continues to keep the supply and demand under review and to maximise the supply of affordable housing.

14. From Cllr Jessica Arnold to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Commissioning and Contract Management

Councils are required to spend section 106 monies received from developers within a five-year time limit. Of the £9,446,000 section 106 monies projected at year end 2022/23 (page 132 of the public agenda pack), how much of this funding is due to expire and therefore will be lost if it is not spent, during 2023/24? Is there a plan for spending any such 'at risk' funds so they are not lost?

Reply:

The management and spending of section 106 money is something we have taken seriously for a long time. In the previous municipal term I led a cross-party working group looking at the issue across all portfolios. And while the processes were robust a few changes were proposed. I am happy to confirm to you that, of the £9,446k in the final accounts, 2% is subject to payback risk and officers are looking at ways to spend that money rather than paying it back.