

**Council**

**11 March 2024**

**Questions from Members of the Public for Oral Reply**

**1. From Kieran Terry to the Portfolio Holder for Transport, Highways and Road Safety**

In 2021, when I was a Chislehurst Councillor, I put forward some drawings for road safety improvements at Chislehurst War Memorial. In particular, these included the creation of new pedestrian crossings without the related traffic congestion, environmental and road safety issues from previous proposals. Will the Portfolio Holder consider these plans further?

**Reply:**

I am delighted to inform former Cllr Terry that the proposals he made in 2021 have been developed, funding has been approved and a plan to improve safety at the junction is being presented to the Environment and Community Services PDS Committee on Wednesday. It will not be a perfect solution, but all are agreed that this is the best that can be achieved. I thank former Cllr Terry and the current ward members for their support.

**Supplementary Question:**

Mr Terry asked whether the proposed new crossing could be phased to the traffic lights at the junction?

**Reply:**

Cllr Bennett explained that a major concern was the congestion at the junction, and he did not want to further overload it. Therefore, the proposed new crossing would need to be linked to the existing lights at the junction.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe**

Cllr Igoe referred to the previous petitions for something to be done at this location in October 2019 and February 2022. She was pleased that these proposals were being brought forward, but questioned whether a former Councillor had been informed in advance about this?

**Reply:**

Cllr Bennett was not aware that Mr Terry had any advance notice of the report, only that he been campaigning on the issue for a long time.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Mark Smith:**

Cllr Smith was pleased that the issue was coming to committee again, and asked what the consultation arrangements would be?

**Reply:**

Cllr Bennett responded that he was not sure what consultation would achieve. A range of options had already been investigated, but as, for understandable reasons, the Commons Conservators would not release any additional Common land the opportunities were limited. Cllr Bennett added that, as the houses along the south side Bromley Lane had private drives it would be possible to install double yellow lines there to improve traffic flow.

**2. From Ju Owens to the Chairman of the Executive, Resources and Contracts PDS Committee**

With regards to your recent request for officers to review Bromley Council's processes, policies and procedures to protect and defend freedom of speech, do you agree that freedom of speech does not equate to freedom from consequences?

**Reply:**

Can I thank the questioner taking an interest in the very important subject of protecting Free Speech.

The great news is that no one should ever be fearful of free speech, it is something that should be celebrated, and the ethos of free speech should be shared as widely as possible. The only people who fear free speech are despots, dictators, those who can't stand criticism and those who are incapable of making a rational argument in favour of their own proposition.

In this country there are of course legal restrictions on some aspects of free speech, such as that of incitement or defamation. The requirements asked of our officers are to ensure that freedom of speech is protected within the law. This ensures that our employees are protected from legitimate debate and not bullied or prevented from speaking out. It is essential to democracy that these protections are extended to Councillors too. In general terms free speech is not a licence to be rude, disparaging or fall foul of the Nolan principles.

Under free speech particularly those of an enlightened disposition can enjoy the sharing of views and debating them freely, without unintended consequences.

It is worth reminding everyone of what Lord Justice Sedley said in the Free Speech case of *Redmond-Bate v Director of Public Prosecutions* [1999] EWHC Admin 733.

He said that this freedom encompassed "the irritating, the contentious, the eccentric, the heretical, the unwelcome and provocative" – like me. He invoked the classical Greek philosopher Socrates and warned against state attempts to control unofficial ideas. "Freedom only to speak inoffensively is not worth having."

**Supplementary Question:**

Ms Owens stated that she agreed with the Conservative Party's decision to suspend the whip from Lee Anderson, and asked the Chairman if he would support similar action if a Bromley Councillor expressed similar views.

**Reply:**

The Council can protect the freedom of speech of employees and Councillors before they speak, but cannot guarantee their freedom after they speak.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Jeal:**

Cllr Jeal asked whether Cllr Fawthrop would apologise to the Monitoring Officer for calling her comments disingenuous at the Executive's last meeting? Cllr Colin Smith intervened on a point of order stating that this had already been done.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Shaun Slator**

Freedom of speech can mean freedom from government interference, but we are also seeing threats against politicians, including demonstration outside their homes and offices. Should we be concerned about limits to freedom of speech not just from government but from activists and extremists?

**Reply:**

I agree; intimidation should have no part in our society. Particular issues have been reported to the Chief Executive and action has been taken.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Kevin Kennedy-Brooks:**

Quoting from the Spiderman films, Cllr Kennedy-Brooks stated that with great power comes great responsibility. People looked at how councillors behaved, and it was important that councillors led by example – did the Chairman agree?

**Reply:**

Cllr Fawthrop responded that he was not surprised to hear the Labour party referring to works of fiction. He stated that he always tried to be civilised and lead by example. Language was important, but politicians could sometimes use hyperbole to make their case.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:**

Cllr Igoe stated that she had previously heard a Member comment that homosexuality was a lifestyle choice and asked the Chairman whether he would find such comments offensive?

**Reply:**

Cllr Fawthrop stated that there was no right to never be offended; being offended was a choice. Some were more open and tolerant than others, but it was important to understand and challenge ideas.

**3. From Ray Nowak to the Portfolio Holder for Renewal, Recreation and Housing**

How many households have benefited from the Bromley Household Support this past fiscal year and what is the balance remaining in that fund?

**Reply:**

In the period of 1/4/23 to 31/12/23, a total of 17,789 households benefited from the Household Support Fund. The remaining budget for awards is £67,500 which equates to 338 awards.

**Supplementary Question:**

Ms Novak asked whether it would be useful to identify those most in need of this remaining money?

**Reply:**

We have every expectation that the money will be spent on the most vulnerable. Over £3.7m has already been distributed, so what remained was a very small proportion of the funds.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Simon Jeal:**

An extension of the Scheme for six months was announced in the budget – has Bromley been informed of the amount it would receive?

**Reply:**

Cllr Bear responded that she had not been briefed on this yet.

**Additional Supplementary Question from Cllr Alisa Igoe:**

Cllr Igoe asked whether the new funding could be distributed through the Bromley Foodbank?

**Reply:**

The Council works with partner organisations to raise awareness of the funds available, and has not had any difficulty in using the money.