

COUNCIL (COUNCIL TAX)

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2016

QUESTIONS WITH NOTICE WRITTEN RESPONSES

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LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

COUNCIL MEETING

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25 FEBRUARY 2016

QUESTION WITH NOTICE

A period of up to 15 minutes is allowed for the asking of written questions by Members of Council or a Member of the Executive or the Chair of any Committee.

Questioner: Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

Asked of: Councillor Graham Henson (Portfolio Holder for Environment, Crime and Community Safety)

Question 1:

“Given the frequency of complaints about Housing of Multiple Occupation from across the borough and the need for more inspection and enforcement (which generates increased costs to the authority, why has the Council decided to freeze HMO fees for 2016-17?”

Q1 Answer

The fee reflects cost recovery of the process of administering, inspecting, issuing and monitoring of the license. The cost of this to the Council does not change with the number of HMOs, as the fee is calculated based on recovery of cost of each application.

We believe that the cost of enforcement should be borne by those who commit offences, rather than the public purse, and that is why our administration introduced the charging of Housing Notices as allowed under the Housing Act 2004. This will enable us to impose the burden of the costs incurred by the Council dealing with hazardous housing on those committing the breaches that require enforcement.

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Question 2:

“Given the Leader of the Council has condemned the increase in betting shops, and called for a reduction in the permitted stakes on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals and has lobbied the Government to give councils “the power to protect our communities from the effects of reckless gambling”, why has his administration chosen to freeze all the fees and charges relating to Gambling and Betting (lines: 61, 62a, 62b, and 62c)?”

Q2 Answer

These fees are set under statute and as you will be aware cannot be changed by the Council. Therefore our only recourse is to lobby the Government who, unfortunately, are not that keen in increasing the fees and charges in this area.

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Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Anne Whitehead (Portfolio Holder for Adults and Older People)

Question 3:

“Will you please reconsider the closure of The Bridge – especially given your commitment to supporting the most vulnerable, who will be most adversely affected by this decision?”

Q3 Answer

No final decisions having been taken regarding The Bridge. The decision to close the Bridge has not been made. At this stage, it remains a proposal.

The government’s funding settlement is changing every week and we have received extremely constructive feedback so far as a part of the consultation. The administration will review its position once we have received all the feedback from the consultation, and the funding settlement has been finalised for the foreseeable future.

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Question 4:

“Why are you dismissing the flexibility the social care precept could afford you in continuing to support the Bridge, as was pointed out to you at Cabinet?”

Q4 Answer

There is no flexibility available given the substantial challenges and pressures faced by social care moving forward into next year. The increase in demography and the unfunded changes to Living Wage, which impacts the entire care sector, are just two of the major challenges that far outweigh the benefit of the precept.

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Asked of: Councillor Keith Ferry (Portfolio Holder for Business, Planning and Regeneration)

Question 5:

“Can you explain how potentially forcing Premier Banqueting to close in any way builds into their manifesto pledge of ‘supporting businesses’?”

Q5 Answer

The Premier Banqueting business is not being forced to close. The Council has worked closely with the Premier Banqueting Suite, as we developed our plans for the new Civic Centre, and continues to do so. We have spent several months reviewing alternative relocation sites with the current owners of the business. The Council is offering to purchase their current premises at a full commercial price, which provides the potential for the business to relocate their operations.

This redevelopment of the underutilized Peel House car park will bring major economic benefits to Wealdstone and to the Station Road corridor. By relocating the Civic Centre, we will open up the current Station Road site for redevelopment, to provide a major new residential and commercial area. This move will inject several million per year into the local economy of Wealdstone. There will be major employment, contractor and supply chain opportunities throughout the construction period. Our economic development team will ensure that the local economy benefits directly from these opportunities.

With the help of a recent £1.5m grant under the London Regeneration Fund, the High Street environment will be significantly improved, attracting further new business investment to the centre and reducing opportunities for anti-social behavior. Additional employee expenditure will be drawn into the Wealdstone District Centre, with over 1,000 Council employees moving into the new Civic Centre. This will lead to a long-term enhancement of business prospects for the District Centre as a whole.

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Question 6:

“What message does this Labour administration have for those staff who could lose their jobs if Premier Banqueting closes or is forced out of Harrow?”

Q6 Answer

This is addressed in the previous answer.

The Council is not forcing Premier House to close, but is doing all it can to ensure that the current owners have viable business options for the future. At the same time, our regeneration programme will open out a wide range of new business and employment opportunities in the heart of Wealdstone.

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Asked of: Councillor Keith Ferry (Portfolio Holder for Business, Planning and Regeneration)

Question 7:

“Despite recognising in the latest revenue monitoring report that the amount of business rates collected are in drastic decline in Harrow, and given the Government's decision to base council funding in business rates, why doesn't your draft Corporate Plan describe how your administration intends to reverse this decline?”

Q7 Answer

The recent loss of businesses in Harrow is largely due to the current Government's policy to facilitate conversion of office premises to residential use. Under these new rules, no full planning application is required to make the change and there is no obligation to provide affordable housing or to meet the usual planning obligations in the new development. There is therefore a huge financial incentive for owners of commercial space to vacate their business premises and sell their sites for residential development. The Council cannot require any replacement of the business space that is lost.

When this policy was first introduced, Harrow Council sought exemption from the provisions within the Heart of Harrow area on the basis that they would cause economic harm. Government declined this request.

As a direct result of this Government policy, Harrow has lost an estimated 2,465 jobs to date, representing a loss of £67m from the local economy. Overall, including vacant space, the office floorspace lost represents around 4,280 potential jobs across the borough.

In October 2015, the current Government announced that these changes would be made permanent, so extending and exacerbating the risk to Harrow's local economy.

Our regeneration programme makes provision for some 3,000 jobs in new workspace within major developments. This includes significant commercial space at Harrow View East, as well as recently completed workspace at Artisan Place, Wealdstone and at Stanmore Place. There will also be commercial and employment floorspace in developments on the existing Civic Centre site on Station Road and in the Greenhill Way redevelopment. This is all in addition to the wide range of business support programmes that the Council offers.

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Asked of: Councillor Keith Ferry (Portfolio Holder for Business, Planning and Regeneration)

Question 8:

“What is the total amount of business rates collected from the businesses in the High Street and immediately adjoining roads in central Wealdstone?”

Q8 Answer

This information is not easily available and will need investigation to ensure the appropriate premises are captured and included in any reported data.

I am happy to provide you with a figure once Officers have had an opportunity to research the matter.

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Questioner: Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

Asked of: Councillor David Perry (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Corporate Leadership)

Question 9:

“For each department, please itemise all magazine, newspaper and journal subscriptions that the Council has, and confirm for each if they represent good value for taxpayers’ money?”

Q9 Answer

The Council’s financial ledger does not record expenditure to such specific detail. This question will require further work and a written response will be provided.

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Asked of: Councillor David Perry (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Corporate Leadership)

Question 10:

“Can you provide a service/capital financing assessment for each line of the capital budget?”

Q10 Answer

This information can be provided at individual scheme level and will be circulated.

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Question 11:

“Can you itemise the cost of each of the Council’s outside bodies’ subscriptions, memberships and other associated costs, and confirm for each if they represent good value for taxpayers’ money?”

Q11 Answer

See attachment. This information was produced in May 2015 as a result of a Member request.

The Council’s financial ledger does not record expenditure to such specific detail. This question will require further work and the attached list will be expanded to cover the additional information requested in the question.

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Question 12:

“Can you provide us with a ward-level breakdown for business rate collection in Harrow for the most recent financial year, and confirm whether any individual wards have seen an increase in collection from previous years?”

Q12 Answer

Unfortunately Business Rates system data is not organised on a ward basis and as such it is impossible to provide ward-level breakdown analysis of collection performance.

I can however confirm that as of 21/2/16 Harrow had only £1.65m arrears made up as follows;

2014/15 £1.04m
2013/14 £395k
2012/13 £184k
2011/12 £37k

Wards with the highest level of arrears largely reflect the fact that the wards have a high concentration of business premises. Collection performance is relatively similar in all wards reflecting the fact that enforcement action is implemented according to the recovery policy in place and applied equally in all areas of the borough.

Generally I can confirm that overall in year collection rates are approximately 96.5% and over 3 average 98%.

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Questioner: Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

Asked of: Councillor Glen Hearnden (Portfolio Holder for Housing)

Question 13:

“Can you provide an update on your administration's lobbying efforts to get the Government to exempt Harrow from the Government-mandated 1% reduction in council rents for the next 4 years?”

Q13 Answer

Lobbying is ongoing and we will be in a position to update members on progress in the months to come.

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Question 14:

“What is the estimated timescale for construction to be started, completed and then for sale of the two houses proposed for private sale in Masefield Avenue to cross-subsidise the provision of social housing in Harrow?”

Q14 Answer

Construction started in February 2016 and completion is due March 2017 along with properties for rent in Chenduit Way and Binyon Crescent. Marketing of the sale units will commence in advance of completion.

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Question 15:

“What assurances can be given that all newly-acquired properties for use in council lettings will be properly maintained by the Council given that it often struggles to maintain its existing HRA properties in a good state of repair, the proper maintenance of estates and to ensure improvements are carried out in a reasonable timeframe?”

Q15 Answer

All properties acquired within the HRA will be maintained in the same way as the rest of our housing stock, i.e. to the high standards that are now in place, for both day to day repairs and the improvement programme where standards have been developed in partnership with residents. It is worth noting that customer satisfaction with repairs to tenants' homes remains consistently in upper quartile at over 98%.

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Question 16:

“What is the justification for the 340% increase in application fees for riding establishments?”

Q16 Answer

The past fees have not accurately reflected the cost to the Council of administering such licences. This fee still reflects favourably compared to neighbouring boroughs, for instance Barnet at £663 compared to £365 in Harrow.

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Question 17:

“Why has the Council significantly reduced initial application fees (by 65%) and renewal fees (by 81%) for Sex Shops whilst hiking fees for Occasional Licences (by 4-6%) and for Special Treatments (by 4%)? Does this emphasis on promoting the economic opportunities of Sex Shops reflect the council’s new corporate values?”

Q17 Answer

As reported in the Cabinet report of 20th January 2016, the reduction in fees associated with Sex Shops reflects the decision of a Supreme Court case in April 2015, being R (on the application of Hemming (t/a Simply Pleasure Ltd) and others) (Respondents) v Westminster City Council around the limitations of what could be charged. The reduction is therefore carried out to fall in line with this judgement, and reflect the cost of administering such licenses. It can be noted that there is currently no such premises in the borough. Regarding the other fees and charges mentioned, these are assessed on their merit, and on the basis of the cost of administering these licenses in line with legal limitations.

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Question 18:

“Can Cllr. Whitehead enlighten us as to the whereabouts of the £305 million brand new hospital at Northwick Park that Gareth Thomas promised Harrow residents back in 2005 and which was due to have been operational by 2010?”

Q18 Answer

If the Conservative Government in coalition with the Liberal democrats had not wasted £3bn on their costly and bureaucratic top down restructure of the NHS then this money may have been available.

As the Independent Healthcare Commission’s findings have shown, the Tories restructure of the NHS has seen millions blown on consultants in inefficient and costly restructures.

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