

Cabinet – 22 November 2012

Public Questions and Answers relating to Whitchurch Playing Fields

1.

Questioner: Stephen Lewis

Asked of: Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts

Question: What is your view on the outcome of the saga regarding the development of the Whitchurch Pavilion and Playing Fields?

Answer: Thank you for your question Mr Lewis. I am sorry but I cannot agree with your use of the word 'saga'.

There have been three previous Cabinet reports and extensive public consultation with local residents since the commencement of the Whitchurch Playing Fields project in November 2008.

On 26 March 2012 the Whitchurch Consortium organised a public meeting at Whitchurch School which was very well attended by local residents.

At this forum a comprehensive overview of the Consortium's proposals was provided, together with an opportunity for residents to ask questions and raise concerns.

On 12 May 2012, the Whitchurch Consortium organised a Fun Day which was also very well attended by local residents. This event was intended to provide a good example of a typical event day and, importantly, to provide extensive information on the Whitchurch Consortium's proposals for the site.

The Whitchurch Consortium also established a dialogue committee which I understand has met on two occasions so far.

In addition, the Whitchurch Consortium undertook extensive door-to-door consultations in the locality.

The outcome of this engagement was reported to Cabinet, in detail, at our meeting on 20 June 2012.

The Corporate Director's report clearly set out the many and various concerns that had been raised by residents and all residents can be assured that this administration has understood the issues that you have raised with us.

Importantly, the June Cabinet report also advised that a petition containing 1,265 signatures supporting the Whitchurch Consortium's proposals had also been compiled during the door-to-door engagement.

Although the process for selection of the Council's preferred bidder, the wide ranging engagement with local residents and the negotiations in respect of commercial terms has been time consuming, I am confident that the outcome will result in fabulous new facilities for our community.

I am therefore very pleased that this administration has persevered with these proposals, despite early difficulties and criticism and I am convinced that the proposal will become a hugely successful and well supported sports and leisure facility which will be used extensively by the residents of our Borough for many years to come.

Our careful approach and in particular, our concern for the views of local residents, has ensured that:

- the best partner for the development and operational management of the Playing Fields has been selected;
- the reasonable concerns of local residents have been openly debated in public forum, carefully and comprehensively considered by this Cabinet and will be safeguarded through the lease terms and the statutory Planning and Licensing processes;
- superb new sports and leisure facilities, and most importantly, high quality outdoor sports pitches, will be available for our sports men and women, boys and girls, to develop their skills, perhaps even going on to represent Harrow and their country in future world class competitions, in particular the Olympics.

The Service Level Agreement which has been negotiated with the Whitchurch Consortium will provide for extensive, low cost access for disadvantaged and protected groups within our community.

Supplemental Question: Can you tell us how the report demonstrates the safeguarding of public concerns and why did officers refuse to meet residents before submitting the report?

Supplemental Answer: Our Corporate Director met you on one occasion and there have been many meetings and phone calls, including extensive consultation. I do not think you are justified in saying that they have not met you.

2.

Questioner: Mr A J Pais

Asked of: Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts

Question: The proposed development at the Whitchurch Playing Fields site will undoubtedly give rise to further nuisance to local residents from increased traffic, noise and anti-social activities. Given that the already planned increase in pupil intake at Stanburn School and a likely increase in numbers at the Whitchurch School will make the traffic situation much worse even before the Whitchurch Playing Fields project makes the situation simply unbearable.

Whilst the local residents accept that some improvements to the site are necessary, why has the Council not carried out any studies or assessments regarding traffic, noise and anti-social behaviour problems that would be generated by this project in the surrounding streets and why has the Council not sought to listen to the concerns of the local residents and take their views into account?

Answer: Mr Pais thank you for your question.

As I said in my response to Mr Lewis and as has been made clear at previous Cabinet meetings, the issues associated with increased traffic, noise, and any other potential adverse impacts which may arise from the operation of a modern sports and leisure facility on the Whitchurch Playing Fields site will be most carefully considered as part of the formal Planning and Licensing processes.

I am sorry but I cannot accept your view that the Council 'has not sought to listen to the concerns of the local residents and to take their views into account'.

There has been substantial engagement with local residents and there has also been much engagement with some residents at previous meetings of Cabinet.

Through this previous engagement, this Administration, in particular all of the Members of Cabinet, have been able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concerns of local residents, in particular those whose homes immediately adjoin the site and also the strong interest and support for a new, modern, sports and leisure facility that has also been expressed by other residents.

We will do everything possible, working with the Whitchurch Consortium, to ensure that all potential adverse impacts are carefully and properly identified and managed through the Planning and Licensing processes.

These processes are fully transparent with all decisions being made at meetings which are open to the public, with officer reports that are

available to residents from the Council's website.

It is very important that we plan today to ensure that our sports men and women, boys and girls, are able to access high quality, modern, sports and leisure facilities.

Our Borough is growing. We need to recognise that growth is a positive thing and we, the entire community, need to work together, to embrace opportunities to improve the facilities essential to the life of our Borough in the future.

Supplemental Question: I beg to differ with what you have initially said about consultations having taken place. At a fully packed building in the Whitchurch School, all the local residents gathered together, put their hands up, bar three, all of them were against this project.

I accept that there are some improvements necessary in this place. I have not seen a questionnaire that you have sent around which listed all the questions and we could have written down our concerns. There has been nothing of the sort. You keep talking about a so-called consultation document carried out by the developer. Obviously, they are going to, if at all, frame the questions as it suits them.

The Council has already given permission to Barnet Football Club to play league matches at Prince Edward Playing Fields. Just a few hundred yards from this site. This in itself will create vastly increased traffic on match days and there is no way you could deny that fact.

My question is not going to make sense without me reading this. The traffic going towards Broadwalk in Edgware already backs up halfway to Prince Edward Playing Fields, even on working days.

We know that the Council has chosen to ignore the views of the local residents, but why has the Council failed to carry out a comprehensive assessment of traffic, parking and anti-social behaviour problems. Can the Portfolio Holder tell us whether they have consulted other agencies such as Police, Fire Brigade, Highways Agency and local establishments? Will the Council postpone its decision until this is done properly?

Supplemental Answer: The things you mention – traffic, noise, will be part of the planning process. You would be consulted again by the Planning Department independently and you will have an opportunity to respond to it. The decision will then be made in public. You could attend the Planning Committee to listen and make your comments and then the Planning Committee will make the decision.

7.

Questioner: Melanie Lewis

Asked of: Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts

Question: Can the Cabinet tell me how soon I can expect to receive confirmation that, in accordance with the Commons Act of 2006/7, Whitchurch Playing Fields has been registered as an Open Space and will never be available for development?

Answer: An application made under the Commons Act 2006 to register Whitchurch Playing Fields as a Town or Village Green was received by the Director of Legal & Governance Services on 16 November 2012.

That application will be reviewed by Legal Services in due course, in accordance with the provisions of the Act and associated regulations, to ensure that it has been validly made and meets the necessary minimum procedural requirements.

If so, the application will be advertised and all those with legal interests in the land, including the Council in its capacity as landowner, will be given the opportunity to object.

Evidence submitted by the objectors and by the applicant will be considered by the Council, in its entirely separate statutory capacity as the relevant registration authority for applications under the Act.

I would emphasise that the decision to allow or refuse the application is not a matter for Cabinet but will be made by a non-executive licensing panel, following appropriate legal advice, as to the merits of the application.

The application will be progressed by the Council, as registration authority, with all reasonable speed but that process will take place independently from the matters in respect of the Council's landholding being considered by Cabinet this evening.

Supplemental Question: First of all the inquiry has to be completely independent and cannot be anyone within the Council, that is the law and secondly, once the application has gone in, nobody may encroach on the land until the inquiry is over.

I understand the inquiry is going to take up to two years, so who is going to inform the Consortium that they have now got a possible two year wait until they can get hold of that land?

Supplemental Answer: Our Legal Department will inform the Whitchurch Consortium and follow the due legal process.

8.

Questioner: Michelle Stern

Asked of: Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts

Question: Why hasn't the Corporate Director for Place Shaping met with us, the residents living around Whitchurch Playing Fields, to discuss with us our continuing concerns prior to the submission of the paper for decision by Cabinet on the future of Whitchurch Pavilion and Playing Fields, despite his being directed to do so in writing by the Chief Executive, and does the Leader feel confident, therefore, that the decision being made tonight is really being made on the basis of full and meaningful consultation with local residents?

Answer: Thank you for your question.

A comprehensive report regarding consultation with residents, in respect of this project, was presented to Cabinet by the Corporate Director Place Shaping on 20 June 2012.

A meeting with the representatives of local residents which was attended by a number of Councillors and the Corporate Director Place Shaping, was held in Civic Centre Committee Room 5 at 4.00 pm on Thursday 7 June 2012.

The matter to be considered by Cabinet this evening deals with the commercial formalities relevant to any future partnership between the Council and the Whitchurch Consortium.

I understand that the Corporate Director of Place Shaping wrote to Stephen Lewis, the Co-Chair of the Abchurch Residents' Association on 19 November advising that he 'would be happy to arrange a meeting to discuss concerns and to ensure that engagement with the local community is effective in the future'.

As the Portfolio Holder who has had overall responsibility for this project since May 2010, I am really disappointed that residents continue to express strong concerns regarding the extent and quality of the engagement, in respect of this important project.

I fully accept that your concerns regarding the consultation efforts are presented to us in good faith and I am very keen that we develop our approach with our partner, the Whitchurch Consortium, in a way which, as far as is reasonably possible, meets your needs and expectations.

I would be more than happy to attend the meeting which the Corporate Director of Place Shaping arranges with you and other residents.

Supplemental Question: What was your comment on the Consortium's presentation of 26 March, your personal comment about that?

Ms Stern: I would like to say that taking a petition around, coming from Whitchurch Consortium; that is not consulting local residents, that is just making it up what they feel like. Also, the Fun Day was not for local residents but the Whitchurch Consortium had 'shipped in' to their Fun Day.

We have not been consulted and for you to say anything else is not true. Also, I would like to point out that this is high flood area land. How can it possibly be developed on and how can you sign this contract tonight when it is about to be declared as an open space?

Supplemental Answer: Sorry, you are incorrect.

Any issues will have to be dealt with by the Courts.

9.

Questioner: Raymond Read

Asked of: Councillor Thaya Idaikkadar, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Property and Major Contracts

Question: The report mentions "numerous similar LA schemes" regarding the development of playing field sites. Could you name some of these schemes?

Answer: Mr Read, thank you for your question.

I think you are referring to the statement made in the last paragraph on page 255 of this evening's agenda papers.

I am advised by officers that other examples of long lease agreements to enable inward investment for the development of sports and leisure facilities are in place or in the process of being developed at:-

- Wimbledon Park Sports Centre, Portsmouth
- Patcham Court Farm, Brighton
- Patcham Place, Brighton
- Blake Hall Sports Club, Wanstead
- Copthall Stadium, Mill Hill
- Warren Farm, Southall;

and our very own

- Prince Edward Playing Fields, Edgware

Supplemental Question: Were any of these developments ones where the authority was acting against the wishes of the local residents? Were any of these sites inspected by the Council to see that they are in a similar situation to us here in Whitchurch Playing Fields?

Supplemental Answer: There are several places even in Harrow that are very similar and also there are school halls in Harrow. There are school halls backing onto houses.

Everything will be considered and this is where the Planning Committee will make sure any disturbances to the residents are to a minimum.

Further, the Licensing Panel will make sure appropriate gadgets are available to stop excess noise and sound coming to your properties. If you are disturbed, the Environment Department will come and fit a noise limiter inside your house, with your permission and monitor the noise levels and if they are too high, they will take appropriate action.