

COUNCIL – 28 FEBRUARY 2013

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

A period of up to 15 minutes is allowed for the asking of written questions by members of the public of a Member of the Executive or the Chairman of any Committee.

1.

Questioner: Mic Sayer

Asked of: Councillor Phillip O'Dell (Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Safety)

Question: “On behalf of the environmental groups of Harrow can the Council please advise us when the consultations will be for the proposed Budget open space savings e.g. opening and locking park gates and park maintenance?”

Answer: Thank you Mr Sayer.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those groups that Mic is representing tonight, whether they be the Harrow environmental forums or the Friends of parks groups, like Canons Park, your own Harrow Recreation Ground. I would like to commend to Council that we do congratulate the work and our continued work with those groups, in making our parks and open spaces a success for the residents of Harrow.

The engagement with the community will be implemented after tonight's budget meeting and consultation will take place in March and April of this year.

2.

Questioner: Angela Dias

Asked of: Councillor David Perry (Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services)

Question: “There is a substantial body of evidence which proves that the Third sector provides excellent social and economic value on the contracts we deliver, and also makes a firm impact on the Council being able to meet its targets in areas where they receive ratings/accreditation. Given that our services make a massive difference to well over 25% of Harrow people in key

areas such as achieving independence, economic well being etc, can you explain why such a small proportion of Council contracts are with the third sector?"

Answer: Thank you for your question Angela.

In 2012 Cabinet approved a Sustainable Procurement Policy to deliver local opportunities for the Third Sector to engage in the delivery of services to the Council. In developing the new Third Sector strategy with the voluntary sector the Council will be undertaking to conduct a review of the implementation of the Sustainable Procurement Policy. This will be coming to Cabinet in March and I think you have actually played a role in that, so thank you. Departments across the Council already have contracts with Third Sector organisations to deliver a wide range of services and therefore the Council is interested in hearing where the Third Sector feel they can add value in the future.

Supplemental Question: I think there has been, from time to time, indications that the Council may not recognise the full value of the Third Sector and I cite examples where statements have been made that the Council gives the sector a certain amount of money or SLAs describe the financial transaction between the sector and the Council, using terms such as financial aid. Giving sounds like a donation that has been made and financially it sounds like funding has been to rescue and support us. This does not reflect the experience we have which is about receiving money in return for services provided.

Can you reassure us that you do in fact value the sector and will follow through in the promises made by the Leader to the hardest hit and at the GAP meeting to meet with us and take seriously all ideas we have for helping the Council reduce funding whilst adding to the sustainability of the sector?

Supplemental Answer: Yes and just to elaborate on that slightly, I think at the recent Grants Advisory Panel this was something which you and other representatives of the voluntary and community sector raised and I gave a commitment there. I will happily give the same commitment this evening to meet with yourself and other voluntary sector representatives because I know you have lots of ideas on how the sector can deliver further services for the Council and I think you have already alluded to some it would be cheaper through the sector than through some current contract.

So as I said, not just myself but other relevant Portfolio Holders would be happy to meet with you in order to hear your ideas.

3.

Questioner: Jeremy Zeid

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

Question: “Does the Council's Code of Conduct for members still have a blanket exclusion from members participating in any debate or vote, to the point of having to leave the room/chamber if they have declared, or have a prejudicial or pecuniary interest in a particular item?”

Answer: Thank you Jeremy.

Harrow's Code of Conduct for Councillors provides that if a Councillor has a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest in an item they should not participate in the debate; not vote and leave the room in which the meeting is being held unless they have an exemption to that, a dispensation, they should be able to leave.

Supplemental Question: Does the Leader agree with the Standards Panel that changed the rules so that Members claiming Council Tax benefits would otherwise have to leave the room or face criminal proceedings, can now participate?

Supplemental Answer: You have got to think about all the people consulted. Do you leave out people claiming benefit?

It is a fundamental principle of civilisation. People elected here have the right to vote whether they are claiming or not. If you do not do that, you are going back to the dark ages where only the rich can vote. There was a time when only men can vote.

This is why they are disclosing properly and everyone is aware of it. They are exercising their right and they have a dispensation, they are voting. I do not see anything wrong with that.

4.

Questioner: Jack Welby

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

Question: “Can the Portfolio Holder for Finance and magician in finances kindly explain why he does not use the £350,000 profit from the sale of Endeavour House whose value was £1 million according to Councillor Ferry, in keeping front line services running and the balance for restoring cuts to the budget for 2013/14.”

Answer: Thank you for the question.

I assume you mean Enterprise House. The short answer to this is it is not allowed under law. We cannot use money from the sale of assets to pay for the day to day running of the Council.

What we can do is use the money to fund investments in other areas or use it to spend on things we would have to borrow for, which allows us to borrow less money than we would have done and that saves us money on interest and that is exactly what we are going to do and that is why we can reduce the amount of cuts that we would have otherwise had to have done.

Supplemental Question: It has been brought to my notice this evening, unfortunately I could not bring it to the attention to the appropriate authority, there is a likelihood to be £45m worth of cuts to the Council budget and 256 members of staff are going to be made redundant and that was in the web this evening and in view of the demise of the Council, I have a presentation being a resident of Harrow Council for 33 years, that I present these flowers in memorial for the Council demise.

Supplemental Answer: I think that is the best supplementary question I have had in my time on Cabinet.

You are absolutely right, there are huge cuts at this Council and that is because of an appalling Government and their unfair cuts to Local Government. If this Government would cut local government less, you would not need to have bought those flowers and not present them.

This Council has also launched the Fair Grant for Harrow Campaign because we do not get a fair grant from Government and if we got the fair grant then we would also not have to make those cuts. So I hope you will sign the petition. You can at www.harrow.gov.uk/fairgrant. I hope that you will sign that petition.

5.

Questioner: Steve Porter

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

Question: "Further to my question and later letter to Sachin Shah concerning the removal of DDR to charity shops, would he now agree that this issue needs looking into again?"

Answer: Thank you for your question.

I think the deadline for submitting questions was past before I had replied to the email you sent me.

I said in that email I would be willing to meet with you and others in the voluntary sector to discuss how we best take this forward and I hope you will take me up on that offer.

The changes you mention were the second stage of changes to rate relief. In the budget today we are making a further reduction in the budget of a further £50,000 in the second year of our two year budget. As this change will affect everybody, we will carry out a full 12 week consultation which will start in the early summer.

I hope that this wider and more inclusive consultation will lead to more engagement and I look forward to receiving your views as part of this process.

6.

Questioner: Julie Browne

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

Question: "Subsequent to the decision to cut the VCS Grants budget by 25% Cabinet reinstated 100k to the budget. Can the Leader of the Council please assure us that this reallocation did not impact adversely on the total funding available to the Third Sector to deliver services".

Answer: Thank you Julie. Before I answer your question, may I congratulate you for what you are doing for Kids Can Achieve and also I hope to come to your raffle and contribute in the near future.

In 2010 the Government's austerity measures meant Local Government (along with the Welfare System) received the most challenging funding settlement in decades, resulting in a 28% cut to the Council's controllable costs over the 4 years to 2014/15, some £62m in Harrow's case from 2010/11 levels of expenditure. This has since increased by £13m to £75m as a result of adverse moves in grant funding and the impact of Welfare Reform. This is impacting on our spend in all areas. It is impossible to deliver this range of savings without reducing spend to the Third Sector. However we are working closely with the Third Sector to identify potential impacts and assist where possible with alternative forms of funding and other mitigations.

Supplemental Question: In a recent question to Cabinet regarding the cuts to the voluntary sector budget, the Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services responded by telling us to check the budget. How can he expect us mere mortals to understand your or his budget if you do not know if yourself?

Supplemental Answer: I can offer you a private meeting. I am quite happy to sit with you, go through all the figures, line by line and explain to you.

7.

Questioner: Gerry Devine

Asked of: Councillor David Perry (Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services)

Question: "The reduction in the amount available for grant funding will have a serious impact on the voluntary sector in Harrow, which for some organisations may prove terminal. Whilst the efforts of the Council to restore some funding for 2013-4 are appreciated, the seriousness of the funding situation makes it essential that process of sourcing and allocating funds is as transparent as possible.

Can the Council explain what has happened to the net cut of £70,000, made without notice to the grant allocation, compared to the figures presented during consultation with the voluntary sector last autumn?"

Answer: Thank you for your question Gerry and just to respond briefly to the previous question, I have never said check the budget. I try to give as much information, so it is never as blunt as that and I will try to do as I say with this question.

We have already heard briefly from the Finance Portfolio Holder about the financial situation facing this Council. I personally was there and you were there when we had the consultation on grants back in autumn and the Council under an assumption of projected grant which we received. Then in December when we produced the draft budget, the settlement was again slightly worse than expected. So with all of those the Council had to look at all areas of spend and the grants budget was one of them. You have alluded to the additional £100,000 which we returned to the grants budget but in short, the £70,000 or £69,000 which was removed has gone in help to plug the gap of millions and millions of pounds.

8.

Questioner: Pravin Seedher

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

Question: In view of the fact that Local government minister Brandon Lewis urged Councils to find savings of between 0.5% to 0.9% to achieve a council tax freeze, why has this administration rejected a government hand out in order to increase council tax on residents - whilst in the same breath bemoaning the level of government assistance to Harrow even though other outer London Boroughs which are implementing a freeze receive less assistance?

Answer: I think the comments of the Local Government Minister show he does not really understand what is going on.

The BBC is today reporting 40% of Councils have taken the decision to increase Council Tax. The reason for this is the government is already cutting councils by 28%. Much of these cuts are being funded through efficiencies but there are some real cuts to services.

Freezing Council Tax would lead us to have to make a further cut of £2m over the next 2 years. It is easy for the Local Government Minister to use numbers like 0.5% but £2m is 50 social workers. These are people who save the lives of children. I simply do not agree with the Local Government Minister that we should turn local government into a rump. I know Harrow Council can transform the lives of people in the borough and I simply will not let this Government destroy it.