

Cabinet – 13 October 2016

Written Responses to Question not Reached

11.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution

Question: “The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has recently highlighted the problems of land banking, whereby developers delay building new homes which they have been granted planning permission for in order to wait for the land to increase even more in value. Of planning applications granted in Harrow to build new homes in the last two years, what percentage have been completed?”

Written Response: Sites that developers may seek to land bank are typically larger sites that would normally take longer than two years after planning permission is granted to reach completion. A more meaningful measure is therefore to include sites that are also under construction.

Between April 2014 and March 2016, permission was granted on 43 large sites (i.e. over 10 units), including conversions of existing buildings. These sites totalled 4,747 new homes. Of these permissions, 26 sites or 60% were under construction or completed by the end of March 2016, totalling 1,718 new homes or 36% of those granted permission.

These figures need to be read in context. The Kodak site was granted outline planning permission for 1,800 homes on 9 December 2015 and given the size and complexity of the site is yet to commence but this is being actively pursued by the developer. Stage 1 (Persimmon Homes) is on site and the developer (London and Quadrant) now appointed for stage 2. It is therefore not appropriate to include this site in the figures. Excluding Kodak, 62% of the sites granted permission between April 2014 and March 2016 are under construction, representing 58% of homes granted permission.

12.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution

Question: “The Leader of the Council has previously spoken of working with the charitable sector for the benefit of Harrow residents, what steps has he taken to reach out to local and national charities?”

Written Response: Since becoming Leader I have met with the chief execs of the major Harrow charities. They were all impressed with the council priorities around inequalities. I have also attended a number of events run by charities and spoken at many meetings.

13.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution

Question: “Does the Leader of the Council agree that all children in Harrow are unique and that many will reach developmental milestones at different times?”

Written Response: All children are unique and whilst they share characteristics they do not share them in the same way or to the same extent. All those work with children can readily see this and, as a result, must adapt our services to meet the child’s needs.

In terms of a child’s education it is also clear that not all children reach developmental milestones at the same time. In fact, some significantly enhance their educational performance as late as adulthood, as recognised by further education and institutions such as the Open University. What we seek to do is to help every child to make progress from their starting point as quickly as they can in order for them to do as well as their peers in their chosen occupations and to contribute fully to their own lives.

In recognition of the uniqueness of children and their learning journeys we increasingly talk about ‘stage not age’ and this is officially recognised in Early Years and Key Stage 1 where teachers are able to allow for children to

complete their Early Years work in the usual age band for Key Stage 1. We must always be aware that the testing system we have is heavily focused on some aspects of learning rather than others in the primary years and, through the Ebacc (English Baccalaureate) increasingly in the secondary phase of learning. Lifelong learning opportunities show that educational differences are not set but are often the outcome of circumstance rather than so called 'ability'.

Although there is this tacit recognition of the uniqueness of children in their learning we still have age related testing and public examinations at ages 7, 11 and 16 and not all pupils will excel at this time. This is recognised in the recent research that points to the overall failure of a grammar school system to provide the best for the vast majority of children, but especially those more disadvantaged. In terms of our community the increase in children from overseas with limited or interrupted schooling adds to the need to recognise unique pathways in learning. Harrow has an entirely comprehensive system of which we all have cause to be proud of its achievements. All parties have committed to its success over many years.

14.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Sachin Shah, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Partnerships and Devolution

Question: "As I am sure all Cabinet Members will know, last week saw celebrations for Jewish New Year, how many of the six synagogues and Jewish congregations in Harrow has the Leader of the Council visited since becoming Leader?"

Written Response: I am proud of Harrow's diversity and keen to engage with every community in the borough. Earlier this year I have taken part in a Holocaust Memorial event and I have already planned visits to local synagogues. I would be pleased to receive invitations to visit other synagogues and Jewish congregations in Harrow.

15.

Questioner: Councillor Susan Hall

Asked of: Councillor Adam Swersky, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Commercialisation

Question: “Does the Executive Member for Finance believe the assumptions and predictions made in order to set 2016/17 Budget were sound and reliable?”

Written Response: At the time of setting the 2016/17, there was a realistic context in which the budget was being set as detailed in the Chief Finance Officers report:

‘The current budget climate and timeframe continues to be the most volatile in the Borough’s history. The economic climate and the Local Government Settlement make this budget round particularly challenging. There are significant areas of uncertainty around further cuts, income streams, transfer of responsibilities from central government, Adults and Children’s Social Care, homelessness and the degree of change occurring across the Council that needs to be mitigated. In the wider economy there remains considerable uncertainty about inflation, interest rates, the property market, employment levels and the impact of the economic climate. All these issues affect the Council’s own finances and have major implications for Harrow residents and businesses and may therefore create additional demand on services’.

Despite the difficult financial environment, performance against the savings of £17.5m built into the 2016/17 is good. At quarter 1, 36% of savings have already been banked (blue savings), 59% of savings are on track or partially achieved (green and amber) with only 5% of savings being declared as red. Of the red savings, the saving of £276k relating to the closure of the Bridge was addressed for 2016/17 as part of the outturn process.

Budget monitoring arrangements are robust and allow for the early identification of pressures to ensure management actions can be taken to bring spend back within budget. The quarter 1 monitoring report is transparent in reporting the financial challenges the council is facing, reporting net pressures of £3.8m. After the considerable amount of work that went into the setting of a three year budget, it is disappointing to be facing in year pressures the level we are but these highlight the difficult financial and demand led environment the council finds itself in. Such early recognition of pressures is enabling the council to put plans

in place to achieve a balanced budget for 2016/17 and ensure on going pressures / changes are picked up in the budget refresh process.

One of the single largest pressures this year is the homelessness pressure of £2.5m due to issues outside of the Council's control. The combined impact of shortages of affordable accommodation in London, rapidly increasing rents in the private rented sector and the Governments welfare reforms placing increased pressures on household incomes. This pressure was recognised and the budget setting process set aside £1m for homelessness pressures and a further £1m was allocated to the Welfare Reform Reserve as part of the 2015/16 outturn process.