

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

COUNCIL – 8 July 2010

29. Public Questions

1. Questioner: Pravin Seedher

Asked of: Councillor Bill Stephenson
Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation

Question: “Do you intend to follow the previous Conservative administration’s financial strategy to work with the new government on the proposals laid out in their budget to achieve a Council Tax freeze for Harrow in 2011/12?”

Answer: In the emergency budget on 22 June the Chancellor announced that the Government will help councils to freeze or reduce Council Tax in 2011/12.

It is not at all clear how this will be funded, if at all. Assuming that grant funding is provided to support councils if there were a Council Tax freeze, then we would of course, welcome the support and benefit to residents. However, the previous Conservative green paper which was mentioned in the Cabinet’s budget papers in February, suggests that there would be a freeze for two years. There has already been some back tracking on that commitment and the green paper also said the measure would be funded entirely in savings on central government advertising consultancy and now, there are references to removing ring-fencing. This may suggest, or almost certainly suggests, more of the burden and if not all of it, will fall on councils.

If the funding comes via formula grant then there is a risk that authorities that are below the grant floor, like Harrow, and other authorities will not see any benefit of this. Finally, if this is simply a one-off grant funding then it would mean a bigger Council Tax in 2012/13 to keep the services going or even more savings having to be made. Until we see the precise details of what is being proposed, I think we should reserve judgement.

Supplemental Question: What steps did the Labour group take in the previous four years in terms of helping Harrow to get a better grant

settlement from the then Labour Government?

Supplemental Answer: We fully supported the campaign for a better grant settlement for all outer London boroughs as compared to inner London boroughs. We were supported by our two local Labour MPs.

2. **Questioner:** Amir Moshneson

Asked of: Councillor Phillip O'Dell
Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Environment and Community Safety

Question: "Last Friday my wife chased burglars away from our back garden. From the evidence collected and left in the area, it seems that the burglars spent some time, first trying to get in through the front, and then making their way through several gardens to try and get in through the back. All this was done in broad daylight and on a main street. The previous administration has done quite a bit to improve the crime rates in Harrow including initiatives such as smartwater property marking. What does this administration intend to do in order to improve on personal safety and security and to ensure that our children are not scared to go out to their own gardens?"

Answer: I hope Mr Moshneson and his wife are getting over their very traumatic experience of an attempted burglary at their property.

Harrow remains one of the safest places in London to live and work. Locally we have had many successes including the reducing of domestic burglary experienced. The Council intends to continue this work and remains committed to offering smartwater to all local households who request it.

We are also developing our partnership with the Police to tackle the full range of crime related problems that face our residents and continue to develop initiative solutions.

Supplemental Question: I am obliged Councillor. Are there any new initiatives that you could propose? Something that perhaps was not done before.

Supplemental Answer: Yes, let me explain one of the new initiatives that the council has taken up recently. Last week there was a trend in burglary that was highlighted by our partners in the Police. So the Police and the Council acted quickly by sending out advice to local media, to our network of Neighbourhood Champions and staff, asking that advice be passed onto their friends and neighbours.

3. Questioner: Jeremy Zeid

Asked of: Councillor Bill Stephenson
Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation

Question: “After the elections, one of your members is quoted in the Harrow Times stating ‘This is not a surprise, it was on the cards’. Meanwhile in your literature made wildly varying claims of anything from 30 to 50 million Pounds in unspecified shortfalls. Assuming that there is any truth in these claims, why after two months have neither you nor the cabinet consulted on, nor published any substantive findings or plans to steer Harrow safely through the next three years, while the government realising the urgency published in 42 days, a week early?”

Answer: The council does face significant funding challenges in the coming years. The funding gaps for the next three years are estimated to be around £50m which will require savings to be made of about 30% of our controllable budget.

The final precise figures will not be known until the autumn when the three year settlement is announced. £50m is a realistic estimate made in the medium term financial strategy presented to February Cabinet and agreed by the Full Council, which you yourself voted for I believe.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the imposition of £4m worth of in-year cuts and reductions in our Local Area Agreement awards. Funding had previously been agreed by the Government, which has now been reneged on. This has an impact right across Harrow, both for ourselves and partners. Furthermore, coming to the 2010/11 budget, there is an ongoing £2m overspend in Children’s Services and the pressure of £1m in Community and Environment.

The Council does face very significant funding challenges in the next few years. The new administration has been working hard with officers to agree plans for how the challenges should be approached. Officers have been working for several years in anticipation of the situation to draw up contingency plans and options. Having carefully considered all these plans, refining, updating, then we will bring our three year plan to the July Cabinet, setting out our proposals to deal with this very difficult financial situation.

Supplemental Question: Having read the Labour manifesto promising a “Future fair for All”, we are seeing Adult Services and other frontline services threatened, or at least in headlines. How do you propose to deliver without blowing the balances again and delivering a future, as did the last Government, of “Debt for All”?

Supplemental Answer: The debt for Adults & Housing comes from the £1.3m cut arbitrarily imposed by the Government. This was unnecessary because the Office for Budget Responsibility said that Alistair Darling’s predictions for the structural deficit and the deficit were correct. Therefore there was no need for harsh cuts in this year.

We have to live with that. We are having to sort it out. Yes, it will hit frontline services but it is the Conservative/Lib Dem Government which is imposing these cuts on us in-year and it is quite wrong.