

LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW

COUNCIL MEETING

4 NOVEMBER 2010

PUBLIC QUESTIONS (ITEM 6)

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: Cassie Marie McDonagh

Asked of: Councillor Keith Ferry, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Development and Enterprise

Question: “What are the plans to build more sites for the Gypsy and Traveller communities in Harrow?”

Answer: Written answer to be provided as the questioner was not present.

2. Questioner: Jeremy Zeid

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

Question: “In the light of the public consultation on the Equalities Act and its implications, could the Leader of the Council affirm that he and his administration are committed absolutely to the principles of equality, freedom and justice for all?”

Answer: Thank you for your question. Can I remind you of the motto of this fine Council? “Salus Populi Suprema Lex” – “the well-being of the people is the highest law”.

I can confirm that I and my administration are fully committed to the principles of equality, freedom and justice for all and will, of course, abide by the laws of this country such as the Equalities Act, as best we can. We mean it and will act upon it.

Supplemental Question: Could the Leader therefore explain how it can be right that we consider twinning with regimes that proscribe and legislate against and generally persecute gays, lesbians and the transgendered?

Supplemental Answer: This Council does not work with regimes, the Government does. Therefore you should take it up at a higher level.

3. **Questioner:** Christine Jones

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

Question: "There seems to be some confusion in the way the Neighbourhood Champion system is working.

I am concerned because the original remit that I signed up to appears to have been widened from a fairly passive role of 'reporting issues seen locally as you go about your normal business' to a much more proactive one where we are asked to look out for 'wanted individuals' and more.

Would the Portfolio Holder say when this was agreed and by whom as I have not been consulted on it nor asked to sign any new agreement?"

Answer: Thank you for your question. First of all I would like to thank all Neighbourhood Champions throughout the borough for the voluntary contribution that they are making.

It was the intention from the start of the scheme to provide Neighbourhood Champions with information updates and feedback to be able to support their neighbours in keeping their locality clean and safe and to report issues to the Council and Police.

Supplemental Question: In a number of cases I have received an incomplete response or even no response to issues I have reported, which makes me wonder how well this scheme is working overall. Would the Portfolio Holder accept, as with any new project, it is time to take stock and have a comprehensive review to report what the level of satisfaction is amongst the Neighbourhood Champions, whether or not they are all active and what the fallout rate is and of course, how this is measured?

Supplemental Answer: I agree with your comments, there should be. We are in the process of reviewing the Neighbourhood Champions scheme. Neighbourhood Champions will be asked to give feedback to the system, so we can take and evolve your views of taking part in order to roll the scheme forward across Harrow. Thank you.

4. **Questioner:** Eileen Kinnear

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

Question: For those of my then colleagues who were present on the course for Resonance at the end of last year, my name is Eileen Kinnear and I am here to ask a question of the Leader of the Council.

“At its meeting on 14th June this year the Standards Committee adopted a Statement of Intent which indicated that it would strive to be a model among local authorities in promoting high standards of conduct ... and stated

"The committee will seek transparency in the Council's decision-making so that anyone interested - internal and external - can find out how the Council ensures high standards of conduct and governance. The ethical governance regime at Harrow will be open to scrutiny from the Council as a whole and the wider community".

It then set out 4 main categories for the future work of the Committee to do this, which included working with the public so that they can make their views known. I cannot trace that there has yet been any consultation on this.

Will the Leader please indicate when this consultation should commence and what form it will take?"

Answer: Thank you. The Standards Committee is a Committee appointed by Council with 6 Councillors and 4 Independent Members. It is, as such, answerable to Council and is totally independent of the Executive. I therefore have no direct say or control on the matter you raise.

I have, however, asked that your question be referred to the Chairman of the Standards Committee for him to reply to you. As you will be aware, we have 2 Independent Members of the Committee here, as well as all the Council Members of the Standards Committee.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my congratulations to the Standards Committee on its relaunch. Much has already been achieved, such as the adoption of a Statement of Intent and General Objectives as indicated by the question; new webpages which provide greater detail to members of the public about its role and purpose with a list of frequently asked questions with answers. These are innovative actions among local authorities nationally.

I am confident that the Committee will continue to lead the way in ensuring transparency and accountability in this important area.

Supplemental Question: I thank the Leader for his statement just made. Residents see ethical governance as a concept whereby the whole Council is firmly committed to adherence to the procedures for good conduct of business. Harrow Council recently told the Information Commissioner that they did not investigate how certain Councillors, who last year obtained copies of restricted papers from a closed Standards Sub-Committee, came to be aware that those papers contained their personal data.

As this question still concerns a number of residents, would the Leader kindly agree to meet us to discuss how this occurred?

Supplemental Answer: Thank you for your question which does not seem to be a supplementary to the one before.

I would need to take some legal advice on whether it would be appropriate for me to meet you. In principle, I would not have any objection to having a discussion but it is obviously something which I do not know about and which has been dealt with by the Standards Committee.

5. **Questioner:** Pravin Seedher
- Asked of:** Councillor Bill Stephenson, Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Business Transformation
- Question:** "Given that the Council needs to save £50 million over the next 3 years, how does spending several million pounds extra on new IT equipment help meet this objective, and wouldn't it be best practice to put a contract of this scale out to public tender?"

Answer: Thank you for your question. I think you were present when the Council had a wide, full ranging debate on this matter when all the questions you have asked were answered comprehensively and in full by my colleague, Councillor Graham Henson, who has the overall responsibility as Portfolio Holder for IT.

However, as a reminder, when we came to power we found that the previous administration had neglected the Council's IT, which is currently in a disjointed, dysfunctional state with 95% of the hardware beyond its useful life, totally out of date email systems and software which is extremely hard to maintain and no disaster recovery system. I could go on.

The Council was spending 0.6% of its budget on IT as compared to an average CIPFA benchmark of 2.9%. We could not afford to let this situation continue and had to ensure we had an IT system fit for purpose. We also need an upgraded IT system so we can extend Access Harrow, introduce mobile and flexible working which will lead to considerable savings to the Council and underpins many of our other savings proposals. In short, the Council cannot afford not to invest in better IT.

The procurement process we followed was the one put in place by the previous administration and we believe that this is absolutely the right way forward in these circumstances.

Supplemental Question: You will have heard the old adage "a bad workman blames his tools". In your case, your administration is blaming your IT.

Would you not agree that your administration would look pretty poor when after spending millions on new tools, it delivers budget overspends and tax rises?

Supplemental Answer: Mr Mayor, I am not blaming any tools, I am blaming the previous administration.