

**LONDON BOROUGH OF HARROW**

**COUNCIL MEETING**

**4 NOVEMBER 2010**

**QUESTIONS WITH NOTICE (ITEM 10)**

Fifteen minutes will be allowed for Members of the Council to ask a Portfolio Holder a question on any matter in relation to which the Executive has powers or duties.

- 1. Questioner:** Councillor Susan Hall
- Asked of:** Councillor Margaret Davine (Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing)
- Question:** “Will you guarantee that no Harrow resident who currently receives a discretionary disabled Freedom Pass will cease to do so as the result of any decision taken by your administration?”
- Answer:** We are currently consulting Adults Services users on a range of issues including concessionary travel. No decision is to be made until the outcomes of the two consultations which are being conducted are known.
- (Cllr Stephenson)**
- We conducted a thorough review of concessionary travel, Freedom Passes, blue badges and taxicards and have identified some issues concerning eligibility criteria, the way in which the system is administered and how assessments are carried out. We are now looking at the possibility of centralising all concessionary travel, administration and assessment works to ensure the service is more integrated and efficient and in particular, avoiding duplication and ensuring consistency of decision making.
- As I said, this is out for two consultations. One is going out now, there will be one in the new year. Until we have had the outcome of those consultations, we cannot give you any assurances either way.
- Supplemental Question:** Can you please give us some indication because clearly we are being lobbied for a decision? Can you give us some idea when you may have an answer to the posed question?

**Supplemental Answer:** At the moment we are discussing the consultation and people will remember for Social Care, that we have to go through an elaborate form of consultation, both consulting about what we can consult about and then going out for the consultation. We will not have outcomes until February / March 2011. We will then be able to have some indication as to what we may be proposing.

I have given an indication of the areas under consideration in the consultation paper. If anybody has any concerns please do make your views known. That is what the consultation is all about. It is one of the biggest consultations that has ever been carried out in this Borough on Social Care.

2. **Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

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

**Question** "As part of fulfilling your pledge to listen to residents, have you considered implementing something along the lines of Redbridge Council's online 'YouChoose' scheme, which allows residents to prepare dummy budgets – seeing the financial and service impacts of their decisions – and to submit suggestions on how the Council should make spending choices?"

**Answer:** Thank you for the question. As I have indicated on several occasions, we are always ready to learn from what other councils are doing and indeed, many councils are contacting us to learn about our innovative Transformation Programme.

As you will be aware, I have also suggested to the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, that it might be interested in undertaking some work in this area. They could perhaps look at what happens in Redbridge and elsewhere. However we are already exploring the possibility of developing a 'YouChoose' scheme on the website and we have contacted Redbridge to understand how they have taken this forward, as well as speaking with the Local Government Improvement and Development, formerly IDeA, who actually developed the tool.

**Supplemental Question:** The Leader of Redbridge Council wrote to you on 11 October 2010, telling you about the Redbridge scheme, which has now clocked up over 3,700 submissions to it. Instead of taking this forward, which is a free piece of software and making sure that it is online and operative before we start really getting the budget sorted out, we seem to have instead an administration which seems to be committed to more gimmicks that does not seem to know what it is doing.

Do you regret having wasted almost a month before actually getting on with actually implementing a Redbridge type scheme?

**Supplemental Answer:** Councillor Macleod-Cullinane seems to know all about my correspondence.

I have not received a letter from the Leader of Redbridge Council as far as I am aware. As I have just indicated to him, we are on the case. We are looking at it and we are considering it.

**3. Questioner:** Councillor Susan Hall

**Asked of:** Councillor Rekha Shah (Portfolio Holder for Community and Cultural Services)

**Question** "What progress have you made in developing libraries as "community hubs", as stated in your manifesto?"

**Answer:** Thank you. This is work in progress and we will put forward proposals when they are ready.

**Supplemental Question:** Whatever you are doing, do you not then think that it is going to be extremely difficult to do, given that you will have a third less staff?

**Supplemental Answer:** I will provide you with a written response to your question.

**4. Questioner:** Councillor Susan Hall

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

**Question** "Can you update the Council on any responses received as a result of the Motion passed on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2010, regarding the Kenton Road right turning?"

**Answer:** In response to the Motion, the Chief Executive wrote to Boris Johnson, Mayor for London. He responded to the matter and said that it was one for Brent Council as the relevant Highway Authority to deal with.

**Supplemental Question:** We are aware of that because we said this was the case in the first place. Do you regret therefore, the rash statement made by our GLA member, Councillor Navin Shah, saying we were not to worry because he would sort this out by Christmas?

**Supplemental Answer:** At the time that comment was made, Councillor Shah was making a factual statement. As we all know, this government has made cuts on the Department of Transport funding (which funds Transport for London and other London boroughs). Therefore I presume the proposed scheme has not been deemed to go ahead because obviously the costs would be considered to be disproportionate to the benefits.

5. **Questioner:** Councillor Anthony Seymour

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

**Question** "What steps is the Council taking to embrace and implement the government's proposals for the 'Big Society'?"

**Answer:** You are making a big assumption that we embrace the 'Big Society', I do not. I fully accept the general aims and objectives of getting more people directly involved in their local communities, something which is hardly new in Harrow or elsewhere in the country. It is certainly not such a big idea, as it is so often made out to be.

However, the research we have done with Harrow residents under our 'Better together' project shows that people are very willing to get involved and want to have a greater say. There is however a great reluctance among many of them to take over full responsibility for running services. You heard a Neighbourhood Champion articulating that sentiment.

The 'Big Society' is predicated on the principle that councils are part of the problem and that other people should take over from them. I do not accept that at all. Councils are actually part of the solution. We are the key to achieving these aims and objectives of the 'Big Society'.

In Harrow we have so many community projects exemplifying the ideas of the 'Big Society'. Volunteers running 'Under One Sky' and the Harrow Museum; Neighbourhood Champions; all our carers in Harrow; volunteer escorts on Special Educational Needs transport; Civic Centre staff acting as special constables and more generally the One-4-One scheme; our wonderful school governors, all rated good or excellent by Ofsted; numerous sports coaches out there every weekend coaching our young people; all the work done by faith groups and churches, temples, synagogues and mosques. I could go on. These few examples exemplify what I believe should be the aim of the 'Big Society'.

In Harrow we are fortunate that we do have a fantastic community spirit, which we hope to build on. The Council

has a co-ordinating and facilitating role in getting local residents involved in various parts of the Council work and supporting the work of the voluntary community sector. We want to build on this.

**The Mayor ruled the supplementary question invalid.**

- 6. Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane
- Asked of:** Councillor Graham Henson (Portfolio Holder for Performance, Customer Services and Corporate Services)
- Question** “Now that your administration has finally launched its proposals for listening and engagement with residents, do you regret referring to Harrow residents who might be interested in how the Council is run as “armchair auditors” at July’s Council meeting?”
- Answer:** This Council in Harrow believes thoroughness and transparency is about real engagement and ongoing conversation with residents, not just publishing online statistics. We believe in taking influence beyond the town hall.

We fully support the transparency agenda and welcome public interest in the activities of the Council. We also support the proposal that the Council should publish details of their expenditure over £500.

The term ‘armchair auditor’ has been widely used in this context. Indeed Eric Pickles himself said “the simple task of putting spending online will open the doors to an army of armchair auditors, who will be able to see at a glance exactly where millions of pounds was spent last year”. He also stated that he wants to see an army of armchair auditors pore over the information.

I do, however, have concerns about the rules the Government has proposed for this. Harrow Council makes around 24,000 payments each year. The draft guidance requires 15 different pieces of information to be published for every transaction.

My concerns are, and I think all our concerns are, there will be significant effort required to set up new reports on our systems that include all 15 elements. Some of the data may have to be inputted manually, if it cannot be extracted from the system. The plethora of data that will be generated, most of which will not interest the public, will make it harder for the public to find what they want to know.

The requirements seem to be more about comparing councils than allowing residents to see what their council spends its money on. There is a significant fraud risk posed by the publication of so much detail. A significant amount of work would be required to produce the reports each month, review them, redact any sensitive information and deal with questions arising and detailed Government guidelines on what should be published goes against the Localism agenda.

Officers have set up a working group to ensure that we comply with the requirements and we have about 6 months to get this all up and running. The estimate is that costs will be around £20,000. I am sure you will agree with me that this added burden is difficult to manage in a time of such severe funding reductions.

**Supplemental Question:** Thank you. We are being told that we are going to have pop-up living rooms with armchairs across the Borough. When those armchair auditors turn up into those pop-up living rooms, would it not make sense for them to be more equipped with the facts about what Harrow Council is doing, be able to actually have some of that information needed to make real, meaningful engagement and discussion with the Council? Could you tell us tonight where in each ward these pop-up living rooms will actually be?

**Supplemental Answer:** I refer to the answer I have given to the earlier question, except for the part where the pop-ups will be. The Leader has said that he will e-mail that information out tomorrow.

**7. Questioner:** Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane

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

**Question** "Since you last updated us at October's Cabinet, how many more members of the Labour Group have begun "acting within identified roles" but have yet to receive formal appointment and backdated payments?"

**Answer:** Briefly in response to the previous questioner, the packs informing the locations of all the pop-ups and roadshows, will be delivered to Councillors on Friday. The Councillors representing South Harrow have already been advised.

With regard to your question the answer is a very simple one - none.